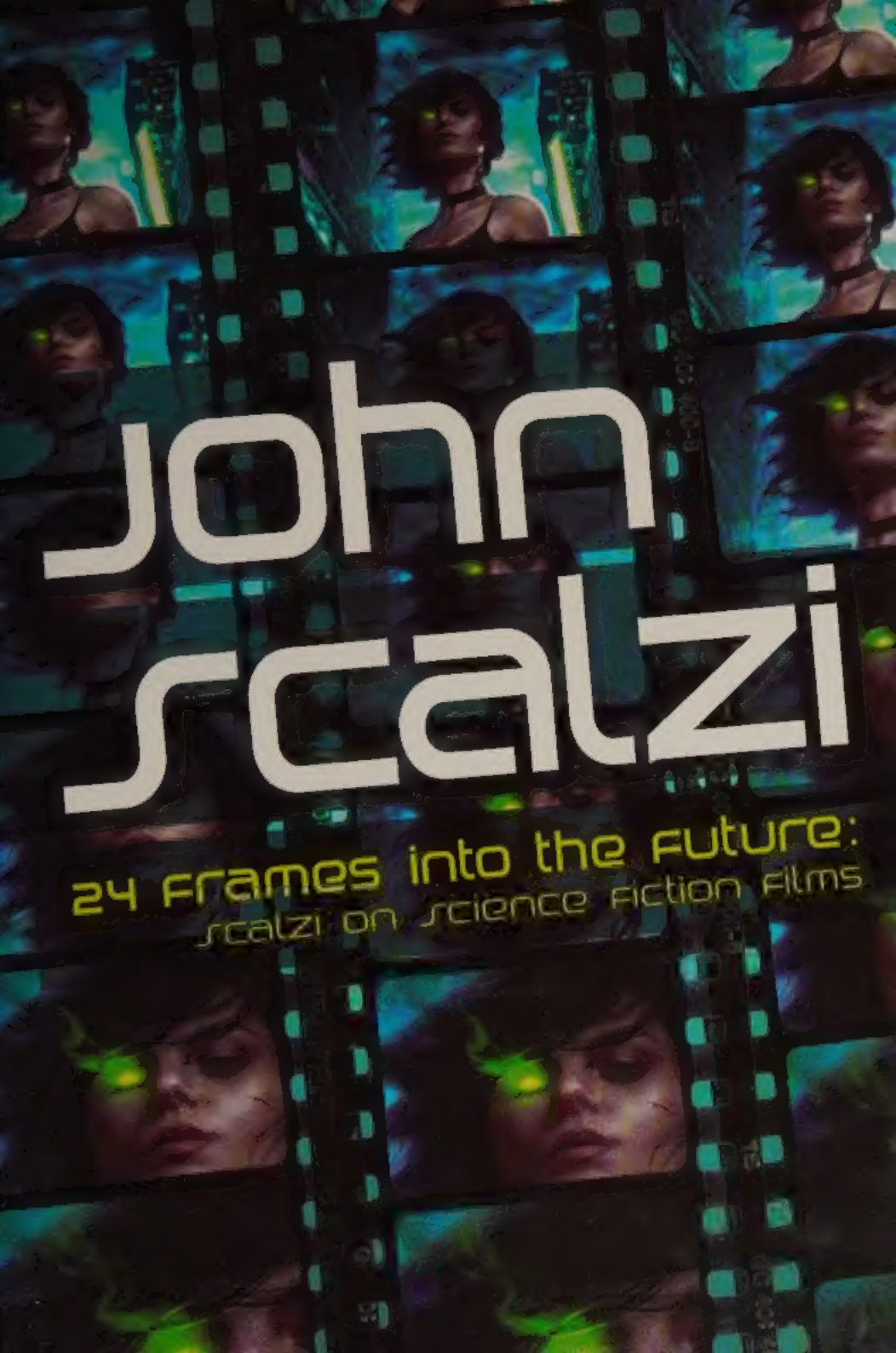
John Scalzi
24 Frames into the Future:
Scalzi on Science Fiction Films

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24 Frames into the Future: Scalzi on Science Fiction Films

John Scalzi's first job was not actually writing a science fiction novel; rather, he was a film critic for the *Fresno Bee*. Only years later did he write *Old Man's War*, his critically acclaimed first novel. In this book, collecting many of his essays on Science Fiction films, you can read Scalzi's thoughts on movies, how they're produced, and how storytelling differs between movie and print. You'll get to read his prognostications about the Oscars and Hugos, and what he felt about how the awards actually turned out — not to mention why "show business" is not "show art." Scalzi also has a lot to say about that rarefied universe outside SF, and he puts into perspective the ways in which it has both taken from SF's culture and fashioned it.

This is the 2012 Boskone book by Guest of Honor John Scalzi, with cover art by Official Artist Dan dos Santos.

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24 Frames into the Future:

Scalzi on Science Fiction Film

BY JOHN SCALZI

EDITED BY PETER B. OLSON

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Review Copy—Not For Resale

This book is dedicated to two of my editors: Tom Becker and Joe Rybicki. Both gave me the ridiculously fun job of watching movies for a living. Tom is gone now but lives in memory; Joe is still here. Thanks to both of you, for the editing and for the friendship.

I would also like to acknowledge all my editors and supporters at AMC.com and FilmCritic.com, for giving me the equally ridiculously fun job of writing about science fiction film on a weekly basis.

—John Scalzi, November 29, 2011

24 Frames into the Future:
Scalzi on Science Fiction Film

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Introducing John Scalzi

There's an old joke in Hollywood that everyone has two jobs: their own and being a movie critic. Anyone who has seen a movie is entitled to their own opinion of it, of course, but there's a reason some of us get paid to share our opinions with others. Occasionally you will run across people who not only have strong opinions on movies but proudly say they ignore critics and never pay any attention to them. I usually respond by pointing out that they are therefore choosing what movies to see based solely upon what the marketing department of the particular film or video company wants them to know, whether it's a trailer, a TV commercial, or the copy on the DVD case.

Then you get the pundits and commentators who are already being paid for their opinions and so they think their insights into movies are just as valid as their predictions on various political campaigns or the actions (or inactions) of Congress. You might run across a writer with a broad range of interests and inquisitiveness who can dive into movies with the same intelligence they bring to other subjects—Garry Wills comes to mind—but often the writer is slumming. It's only about the movies. After all, anybody's opinion is as good as anybody else's, something they would never say if, for example, film critics started writing about the deficit or the Supreme Court.

Which brings us to John Scalzi. I first came across his writing when friends insisted I must read his debut novel *Old Man's War*. I did, and I was hooked, having read most of his novels since then. Now comes this NESFA Press collection of Scalzi's film essays and the alarms go up. Am I competing with his status as a major SF novelist, an award-winning blogger, or as president of the Science Fiction Writers of America? No, I am not. So what is he doing invading my turf? As you'll see from the material in this volume, he's not only invading my turf but he's doing it very well. He brings his fannish interest in science fiction movies as well as his quirky sense of humor to the discussion, plus a breadth and depth of knowledge that, frankly, would be the envy of some of my colleagues. It turns out he has done time in the trenches of film reviewing, not just tossing off an essay on *Star Wars* and declaring himself a critic. This is a man who has endured *The Adventure of Pluto Nash*. This is someone who understands that good film criticism provides context so that in discussing film, music and giving the back of the hand to Danny Elfman's score for the 2001 *Planet of the Apes* remake, he makes a point of noting that he is familiar with and, in fact, a fan of Elfman's other work. More importantly, this is someone who understands another old Hollywood joke—that there's a reason they call it "show business" and not "show art"—and exhibits knowledge both of how Hollywood works and how to assess the rises and falls that occur over the arc of a movie career.

As with the best critics, he has strong opinions but he understands that they are opinions, not holy writ. In other words, he has a sense of humor about himself. One comes away from these essays with a sense that what Scalzi is really conveying is that he likes movies and wants to share his enthusiasm and provoke

discussion. Perhaps 'provoke' isn't quite the word, because it's easy enough to provoke a reaction by taking a stand and denigrating those who disagree. He tries to get readers to think, not simply react. Often he ends his essays with a question as to what the reader feels about the subject at hand. This is someone who enjoys a discussion among fellow enthusiasts, not a dilettante simply looking for the accolades he imagines he deserves.

That last is important. Scalzi is worth reading because of the knowledge and insights he shares, but he isn't pretending to be the last or only word on the subject. Others may know more or have opinions that are equally illuminating, or even counter opinions that will require some rethinking on the subject. Even when an opinion is strongly stated the implied message is that if you can articulate a reason to disagree, that viewpoint is just as valid. As a film critic Scalzi wants to empower his audience, not reduce them to toadying fanboys and fangirls.

Still there's that matter of him being so successful in so many other ways that the ease with which he brings off his film criticism makes one wonder what he'll take on next. Composing music? Sculpting? Running for office? Cold fusion? John, take it from someone who's toiled as a film critic for more than a quarter century. There are beloved novelists. There aren't many beloved film critics, and those few whose musty old reviews still get read tend to appear in college film texts, not in new books or on the latest electronic devices. Perhaps now is the time for you to tackle a massive multi-book series as well as the movie or television adaptation of it, and leave film criticism to those of us who don't have other work to fall back on.

In the meantime, for those of you lucky enough to get this collection of John Scalzi's essays, enjoy your encounters with someone writing with knowledge and wit about science fiction movies not because he has to, but because he wants to.

—Daniel M. Kimmel

Daniel M. Kimmel is the author of *Jar Jar Binks Must Die . . . and other Observations about Science Fiction Movies* and writes on film for [illegible] the *Science Movie Page*, *Space and Time Magazine*, and *Clarkesworld*.

The Opening Credits: Introductions, Dedications and Acknowledgments

Hey there.

First, those of you who do not know my complete professional history may be curious as to why I have written a book about science fiction film. The answer is I didn't write a book about science fiction film, I wrote two, of which this is the second, the first was *The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies*, in 2005. So there's that.

It's also useful to know that before I was a science fiction novelist, I was a professional film critic, first at the *Fresno Bee* newspaper in California (a job I got right out of college in 1991, making me the youngest syndicated film columnist in the United States for a few years) and later as the film/DVD columnist for the *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine* for which I also reviewed music and wrote opinion columns on video game culture. I also reviewed DVDs for the *Dayton Daily News* during that time. In between all that, I've been a professional critic and commentator regarding music, books and video games. In many ways I have better (or at least longer) professional bona fides as a critic than as a novelist. Please feel free to insert your own snarky comment now.

Ironically when the folks at AMC.com approached me to write the columns that make up this book, they did not know of this past, they were aware of me only as a science fiction writer. So when they asked, "have you ever written about film before?" I had a nice moment, before saying out my references.

This book covers roughly the first three years of that science fiction film column, first for AMC.com, and then later for its sister site FilmCritic.com. The folks at both sites have given me considerable leeway in writing the columns, which I appreciate. I try to return the favor by making each column worth reading. I hope you agree that they are.

This book is dedicated to two of my editors, **Tom Becker** and **Joe Rybicki**. Both gave me the ridiculously fun job of watching movies for a living. Tom is gone now, but lives in memory; Joe is still here. Thanks to both of you, for the editing and for the friendship.

I would also like to acknowledge all my editors and supporters at AMC.com and FilmCritic.com, for giving me the equally ridiculously fun job of writing about science fiction film on a weekly basis.

Also a quick but sincere thank you to **Peter Olson**, who edited the book you have in your hands right now, and to **NESFA**, for publishing it. I am delighted these columns are now in book form.

—John Scalzi, November 29, 2011

Editor's Note: Many of these articles refer to events current at the time they were written, so I have included the date each article originally appeared on-line as a postscript to the article.

—June 8, 2011 Next 35, Previous 205

The articles are in chronological sequence within each chapter, but some readers may wish to read them in strict chronological order by referring to the next or previous page numbers.

the first article begins on page 11 and the last article begins on page 299

John Scalzi originally wrote this material on-line. Typically the last paragraph of a few articles invites readers to post comments or interact socially on-line. Some of that has been edited because it doesn't work from the book you are reading. Unless you have some special nanotech. ;) In any case, if you have comments or want to ask John questions about science fiction films, please feel free to contact him at john@scalzi.com.

Also, you will find at the end of the book a section of supplementary material. The first is the end notes, which were derived from links in the on-line articles to other sites on the Web. Almost all of these links still work, even several years after being cited. You'll find these referenced in the main text as footnotes.

The other two are indices of references to movies and people on the AMC Web site. These have been converted into references to pages in this book where these are discussed. The index of movie people may seem to be incomplete, in that you'll find John talking about people not in the index. This is also true of the movie index. What you see in these indices are citations where John had something to say that was especially pertinent to the article.

Thoughts About Movies

What Are the New SciFi Classics?

Last week the American Film Institute does what it does whenever it needs a little attention drawn to itself—it released a bunch of lists about films, this time listing off the top 10 films in 10 different genres. The lists included one for science fiction and one for fantasy. The fantasy Top 10 list is a tremendous mess—enough so that I don't want to touch it right now, except to note that you'll have to imagine me throwing up my hands and rolling my eyes—but the science fiction Top 10 list I found surprisingly acceptable. I have my quibbles with it—primarily I'd drop *Clockwork Orange* and *Back to the Future* (both of which I love), replace them with *Planet of the Apes* and *Akira* or *Metropolis*, depending on how old school I felt that day, and then resequence the order—but by and large it's a perfectly respectable Top 10 list for the genre. So well done, AFI.

One interesting thing about the list, however, is that it stops 17 years ago, the latest film to be included on the list is *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, which hit screens in 1991. On one hand, this makes perfect sense, because it really does take time to find out which films are influential and which ones aren't. Remember, as I'm fond of noting, that *Blade Runner*, arguably the most visually influential sci-fi film of all time, or has to fight it out with *Metropolis*, was a flop when it first came out. On the other hand, there have been a fair number of genuinely excellent science fiction films since Arnold had his Terminator self dipped in hot metal, and it seems a shame to not give a shout out to them.

So let me do what I do whenever I need a little attention drawn to myself, and offer my own list, this one being **the Top 10 Science Fiction Movies Since 1991**. But to make it interesting, I'm only going to fill in half of the list—*you* are going to fill in the rest with your own choices.

To make it even *more* interesting, the five movies I mention here aren't necessarily my *top* five, they're just five that make it on my Post '91 Top 10. Got it? Okay then. In no particular order, then, here's my half of the Post '91 Top Ten:

***The Matrix* (1999):** Cast your brain back before *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, and before everyone and his brother imitated and/or parodied "bullet time," and you'll remember how cool this film used to be—the right balance of action, pop philosophy, techno-angst and special effects. Remember how everyone wanted an ankle-length black leather duster and inscrutable shades to hide behind? It was all very cool once. It will be cool again, trust me.

***Ghost in the Shell* (1995):** Hey, who are those guys over there in the corner? Why, it's the Wachowski brothers, cribbing off *Ghost in the Shell* director Mamoru Oshii's homework! The Wachowskis borrowed from this film in sort of the same way George Lucas borrowed from *The Hidden Fortress*, and good for them, since this film juggles intense action and philosophical silences in really

interesting ways. The fact that *Akira* doesn't show up on the AFI Top 10 List is a clear indication that someone there hasn't figured out what a monumental influence anime has on the modern science fiction aesthetic; we're correcting that error here.

***The Incredibles* (2004):** The best superhero film ever made—yes, even better than the 1978 *Superman*, or the 1989 *Batman* or even *Spider-Man 2* (which, frankly, is overrated). Why is it good? Because first it parodies the superhero genre to devastating effect; then it becomes a first-rate superhero film; and then it goes beyond the superhero genre altogether and becomes a paean to home and family and the little things that make life worth living, even for people with super strength. That this all gets done in an animated family film of all things, makes it miraculous.

***12 Monkeys* (1995):** It may not be the best time travel movie ever; it may not be the best dystopic movie ever; and it may not be the best "saving humanity from its own damn self" movie ever—and it's definitely not the best Terry Gilliam movie ever. But it's the best ever dystopic time-traveler saving humanity from its damn self film, directed by Terry Gilliam. And *that's* saying something. Also: Best Bruce Willis film ever. Which is admittedly a lower bar, although not as low as people might think).

***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004):** This film about memory and the lengths people will go to forget and remember (and sometimes both at the same time) is both goofy, strange and poetically sad, which is an unusual combination, and why it (ironically) sticks in the brain as well as it does. It's the only science fiction film to win the Oscar for screenplay (Original Screenplay, in this case), which says something interesting both about the science fiction genre and the Academy.

Those are my five picks. What are yours? Choose up to five other science fiction films since 1991 for inclusion in the Top 10 list and be prepared to defend your choices.

Ready, set... list!

—June 26, 2008 Next 77, Previous 209

The Ridiculousness of *Riddick*, or, How Not to Make a SciFi Sequel

The readers here at AMCtv.com have been awfully nice to me—thank you—but there's one thing I've done which has created some hurt feelings. Expressing my antipathy for *The Chronicles of Riddick*, the expensive, messy and largely unnecessary sequel to the cheap, smart and generally laudable *Pitch Black*, both starring Vin Diesel and written and directed by David Twohy. Apparently there are a lot of Riddick fans out there, because everytime I dis the flick, even as an aside, I get comments and e-mails asking what I've got against *Riddick*, anyway.

Well, what I have against *Riddick* is that the film took a cool character emerging out of a nifty cult success and basically *broke* it in a misguided quest to make *Riddick* just another summer tentpole flick. In my opinion, all *Riddick* is good for is as a cautionary tale of how *not* make a sequel, science fiction or otherwise.

Where did *Riddick* go wrong? For the edification of all, including those of you who might one day be in a position to *make* a science fiction sequel, let us count the ways.

1. The plot is ridiculously overstuffed

Pitch Black was a little film that knew what it was about. Cargo ship filled with a rag tag bunch of screw ups — and a scary, probably amoral criminal — crash lands on a desert planet just as monsters start pouring out of the planet's bowels and we get to see who survives. Easy, simple, and thanks to Twohy's writing, surprisingly effective.

But then comes *Riddick*, in which Riddick, on the run from bounty hunters, single-handedly has to take down an army comprised of baroque goth fetishists, *and* tries to resolve a long simmering personality issue with an old friend, *and* leads a prison break *and* discovers — through the graces of a nicham-intused Judy Dench — that he's some sort of vague messiah and the last of his race. Any one of these would be enough for an entire film to deal with. Twohy tries to shoehorn it all in, and makes a mess of it.

Why? My theory: Twohy got handed $100 million and change to make his film — i.e., about four times the budget of *Pitch Black*— and freaked out a little trying to justify having that much to spend. He may have also intuited that if he screwed it up, he'd never get that much money to spend ever again. That's got to mess with your head. To be fair to Twohy, it doesn't look like anyone over at Universal said to him, "Hey, you've got a lot of great ideas here—pick *one*." But *Riddick* really would have been better if it just had one story line, not five or six or 12 or whatever.

2. The universe of *Riddick* is not the universe of *Pitch Black*

The universe of *Pitch Black* was this gritty, low rent blue collar universe which

had about as much mysticism in it as Riddick had issues after his "shine job." The universe of *Riddick* on the other hand is this freakadoodle madhouse supersaturated with myth, mysticism, prophecy, ghosts and something called the underverse, which is apparently like hell for the emo set. The only real point of connection between the universe of *Pitch Black* and the universe of *Riddick* is the main character.

When the only thing two films have in common is their main character, it suggests that the main character is a late addition to that second half. In effect, Riddick has been lifted out of his gritty universe and dropped into another overplash universe simply because he's a badass character with a good track record at the box office. Maybe this isn't what Twohy planned, but on the end of things, it's sure what it looks like. A *Pitch Black* sequel would have been better with more of the elements that made *Pitch Black* so good.

Before you comment: Yes, I'm aware that there are two other characters from the first film in the second. One is there strictly as a plot device to give Riddick an excuse to go somewhere, and the second character's has so little to do with her incarnation from the first film that they didn't even bother to hire the same actress. Come *on*.)

3. Riddick stops being human.

In *Pitch Black*, Riddick was a badass, but he was a badass within recognizably human boundaries. He used his brain and his muscles to make it off that monster-filled rock he was on. One of the coolest moments in *Pitch Black* was when confronted by one of the hammerheaded alien monsters, he avoided detection by sliding inside the creature's field of view, and moving from side to side when the alien moved its head. Smart. Cool.

Contrast this with the scene in *Riddick* in which Riddick confronted with feral pumas made out of rock (or whatever they were) doesn't bother to run; he just stares them down with his *manly man eyes*, because now, you see, he's *just that awesome*. And the rock pumas, rather than chomping down on his head as they've done with every other human they've ever encountered (or so we're led to believe), suddenly start acting like love-starved rabbits. You can't blame Riddick for this, but you can blame Twohy. He forgot why his character was so cool in the first place, and instead replaced him with a character too cool to pretend to be realistic.

So what have we learned? When it comes time for you to make your sequel, remember: Keep it simple. Keep it consistent with what's come before. And keep your main character human. If David Twohy could have remembered this, he'd probably be busy premiering the third installment of the *Riddick* trilogy right now. He's not. His loss—and ours.

—July 10, 2008 Next 111, Previous 77

Passing Judgment on *Indiana Jones* and Other Pseudo-SciFi Movies

I'm looking at the box office records for 2008, trying to figure out just how much of the $9.62 billion in domestic sales can be attributed to science fiction movies. The good news is that no matter how you slice it, scifi accounted for a pretty big chunk of the change, so it seems a pretty safe bet that we'll continue to see Hollywood pony up millions to make big, expensive eye-popping science fiction flicks. Go us. The bad news—and it's not really *bad* news, just *interesting* news—is that I'm having a hard time deciding which of last year's movies should genuinely get credited as scifi and which just have science fictional elements.

I've discussed this before, of course, most specifically about *The Dark Knight*, which I don't think quite qualifies as science fiction (see page 113; Is *The Dark Knight* Oscar Ready?). True, it features a number of scifi elements (most notably all the Bat Tech that gets cooked up at Wayne Industries), but at the end of the day I don't think it tips the scale. Leaving aside the murky science fictionality of *The Dark Knight*, however, other major movies this year are also on the "Is it really scifi or not?" bubble. Consider the following $100 million-plus-grossing flicks (and be prepared for minor spoilers):

Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull: It's pretty clear this one has a distinct science fictional component, thanks to George Lucas putting his foot down during the screenwriting phase. But no one on the planet went to go see this movie because of its scifi elements (which were, in fact, the source of most fans' complaints); people went to see it because it's an *Indiana Jones* flick. Does its box office accrue to the scifi ledger despite the fact that it was never billed as such? I'm going to say yes, but I'm not going to argue it very hard.

Bolt: A very cute animated movie about a dog that thinks he's a genetically engineered super-pup because that's the character he plays on a TV show and no one's ever told him the TV show isn't real. It's definitely a satire of science fiction and riffs on any number of science fictional movies including, clearly, *The Truman Show*. The question is, if you riff enough on science fiction and even stuff in a few gnarly special effects, do you become sufficiently scifi to count? Maybe, but for my money this one doesn't.

Journey to the Center of the Earth: Based loosely on Jules Verne's scifi novel, this one should be a no-brainer. But at this point in the game (i.e., 144 years after the novel was originally released), I'm going to front the proposition that the whole "there's another world inside our world" concept is proper fantasy as opposed to scifi, and any movies based on it—even those featuring a dinosaur—don't fit squarely into the genre.

Eagle Eye: It's another "Supercomputer Tries to Run Things" sort of movie, a concept which is definitely science fictional. *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, etc.) But the movie itself was marketed as a contemporary action thriller and you actually had to be in a theater seat before you knew it was science fiction. I sort this in as a sci-fi credit, but as with *Crystal Skull*, you can easily argue that if the movie studio isn't marketing a flick as science fiction, it shouldn't really get to count as such.

Hancock: Science fictional superhero origin story? Sorta. But science fiction like the origin stories of *The Incredible Hulk* or *Iron Man*? Not so much. You could actually have a big debate over whether this was science fiction or straight up generic superhero fantasy, with valid arguments on either side. But to do that you'd have to find two people who actually care enough about *Hancock* to argue the point. For everyone's sake, I'll just say this one's too close to call.

So are these movies science fiction? Ultimately it's a judgment call, and I want to hear your opinion. The bright side to all these "bubble" cases is that whether one considers them genuinely sci-fi or not, the concepts are so pervasive that a movie can snatch up an explicitly science fictional plot point and no one blinks an eye. When sci-fi is essentially part of the background noise of common culture—something that filmmakers can use without worrying whether people will follow it or not—it means that we've won an essential argument about the genre's validity. Once again: Go us.

—January 8, 2009 Next 9, Previous 121

Boldly (and Badly) Going Where *Star Trek* Has Gone Before

The hype around the upcoming *Star Trek* reboot this May is having a paradoxical effect on me, that is it's making me think back almost fondly on the original series with its plywood sets and velour costumes, and William Shatner's famously intoned head swiveling staccato lines. It all seems so innocent, you know? And now look at it. Big and expensive and brilliantly designed to suck *Trek* fans and everyone else on the planet into the movie theaters.

I'm also reminded that for every *Star Trek*—that is, every science fiction television show that has successfully made the leap to film—there are a dozen or so *Lost in Spaces* that have crashed and burned in the transition. But Hollywood doesn't seem inclined to stop trying (note the upcoming and existentially terrifying *Land of the Lost* movie starring Will Ferrell). So as a cautionary tale to film executives and potential audiences, allow me to reheat some of series television to silver screen leaps, and what lessons they might offer us.

***Lost in Space* (1998):** On paper, this one had everything going for it. Oscar-winner William Hurt as the distant patriarch of the Robinson family. Cult hero Gary Oldman as the Robinson family frenemy Dr. Smith, hot TV actor of the moment Matt LeBlanc, and just plain hot Heather Graham. And a specific friendly writer and director team, Akiva Goldsman and Stephen Hopkins, respectively, all doing their part to fluff up a beloved '60s series. In the real world, William Hurt's anodyne mumbly stylings were so wrong for the movie that even he knew it. Oldman's Smith was creepy, not campy, and—for better or worse—signaled the respected actor's new willingness to descend into occasional hackery. Matt LeBlanc reminded us all why TV loves him, and Goldsman and Hopkins showed us that if they ever watched the pleasant, homely TV series, they didn't understand what actually made it popular.
Lesson: Don't just get great talent to turn a TV series into a movie—get the right talent.

***X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008):** Once upon a time, there was a television series called *The X Files*, and audiences loved watching its two principals, Mulder and Scully, talk about the Canadian woods, which were pretending to be American woods, looking for aliens and demons and satanists and conspiracies. They even made a movie while the TV series still ran, and it was pop-ular too, because audiences couldn't really get enough of it. But then Mulder left, and the series got goofy, and the audiences who loved *X Files* turned their attention to *Buffy* and *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* and *Heroes*. Some years after the series ended, the *X Files* people said, "Look! We made a movie!" and all the audiences who used to love them said, "What? You again? We're too busy with our new obsessions to be nostalgic for you," and turned away. And the *X Files* people cried in their empty theaters and were sad.

Lesson. Make a movie when your series is hot, or when your audience is nostalgic for it. The time in the middle when they don't care about it is to be avoided at all costs.

***Serenity* (2005):** Speaking of fans, I've just marked myself for death among the "Browncoats" for suggesting that *Serenity*, based on the TV series *Firefly*, might somehow have been a miserable failure. The Browncoats love their favorite series with a passionate fervor that is usually reserved only for religious icons or the Green Bay Packers, and will not brook the idea that the series and the movie based on it were popular flops, even though the show didn't last a single full season and the movie had a terrible $10 million opening weekend. Well, Fox didn't know what to do with the series!" they exclaim. "Universal didn't market the movie correctly! It did great on DVD!" Yes, yes, I know, Browncoats. Come here, have a hug. Would you like a tissue? No, that's okay, you can keep it.
Lesson: It's great to have loyal, passionate fans of a series, but they're only worth $10 million in opening weekend box office. Also, making a movie out of a TV series no one but hardcore fans saw? Not a recipe for popular success.

Have any other lessons from failed TV series turned movies you would like to add? Do you think *Star Trek* followed these lessons, or is it on its way to becoming a new one?

—January 15, 2009 Next 89, Previous 7

David Bowie Strikes a Chord With SciFi; Mick Jagger Does Not

A friend of mine and I were talking about science fiction movies. I know, a *shocker* — and he asked me a fairly random question. Could I think of any good science fiction movies starring a musician? When I noted the apparent randomness of this, he floated the theory that by and large, people who were famous as musicians tended to make terrible movies, or were at least terrible *in* them **because they're musicians, not actors.**

As a general theory, I do not necessarily agree. Yes, there have been genuinely awful flicks starring musicians. Bob Dylan may be the greatest American songwriter of the last 50 years, for example, but you have to be really committed to enjoy 1987's *Hearts of Fire*. And anyone who ever had this misfortune of watching 1978's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*—starring the Bee Gees and Peter Frampton—is still shuddering from the experience. On the other hand, *A Hard Day's Night*, *Purple Rain*, *8 Mile*, Frank Sinatra and Cher each have Academy Awards for acting, and so on. It's a toss-up.

Nevertheless, let's see how musicians starring in science fiction flicks fare.

1. Will Smith: I mean, *duh*. We mention him here to get the obvious case out of the way. Smith has made some bad science fiction flicks. *Wild Wild West* stands out in its putrescence, and a whole bunch that are entertaining but not necessarily good (see *Independence Day*). But the first *Men in Black* is a keeper, and Smith never embarrasses himself in the acting department (note well: he does have two Best Actor nominations, although admittedly not for his science fiction work). Overall, he's in the plus column.

2. David Bowie: Perhaps it was typecasting for director Nicholas Roeg to cast the man who created Ziggy Stardust as a visitor from another world, but that's just what he did in 1976's *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. And it works pretty well. Bowie is good as an ascetic alien trying to save his planet while gradually falling prey to the distractions of Earth. But Bowie's performance is so much part and parcel with his overall persona that it's hard to tell if he's acting any differently than he does on stage. Bowie would later play a goblin king in the fantasy *Labyrinth*, which I did just as a demerit but which other people, including my wife, love insensibly. So again, another one for the plus column.

3. Mick Jagger. In *Freejack*, Mick Jagger plays a futuristic bounty hunter pursuing race car driver Emilio Estevez through time because—oh hell, I can't remember specifically, but I do remember having to watch this one during my time as a movie critic and writing "THE PAIN, THE PAIN" in my reporter's notebook. I also remember Jagger's cocky smirk as being responsible for at least a portion of that pain. So there's one in the debit column.

Extra bonus: *Freejack* musician actor David Johansen was Buster Poindexter, late of the New York Dolls. He was no damn good in it either.

4. Sting: One only need remember the former Gordon Sumner's spike-haired wide eyed, space Speedo wear ng performance in 1984's *Dune* to recognize just how much he contributes to the debit column here -although I suppose he gets points if you like camp But wait! There's more Don't forget his turn as Baron Charles Frankenstein in *The Bride* a 1985 revamp of can you guess? *The Bride of Frankenstein* But ..I bet that Sting does hope you'll forget it So into the debit column twice for Sting.

5. Tim Curry: Yes kiddies Tim Curry was a musician—and quite a glammy one at that Although he's been in such clunkers like *Congo* and cranked out any number of "doing it for the cash" appearances in video game cut scenes the man earns a lifetime pass in the plus column for being Dr Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* I mean, dude The part was written for him How could he not be excellent in it? Rumor has it that Mick Jagger wanted to play the part in the movie version of the musical You dodged that bullet *Rocky Horror.*

So it's a wash Will Smith, David Bowie and Tim Curry fight Mick Jagger, David Johansen and Sting to a tie Can you think of some others to tip the balance?

—March 19, 2009 Next 183, Previous 53

In Praise of *Dark Star* and Other SciFi B-Movies

And now a list of reasons why I as a movie fan am really digging AMCtv.com's new B-movies site, on which you can watch "classic" B movies from the comfort of your own laptop—why yes, I am shamelessly plugging another portion of the AMC site, so just *deal with it*, pal:

1. The fact is, it's almost impossible to find vintage B-movies on TV anymore. When I was a kid I remember the local stations—most notably KABC, KCOP and KHJ quick! Where does this mean I grew up?—showing B-movies in the afternoons or late at night. I would come home from school, manually crank the dial and feast on flicks about biker gangs and/or musical beach parties and/or badly dubbed Japanese actors cowering as something rubbery stomps a city block.

Those days are long gone. Afternoons have been ceded to Oprah and stern retired judges who lambaste morons for angrily running over someone else's property. Late nights, on the other hand, are jammed with infomercials. Where does one go today for the best in B movies? On television, nowhere.

2. No one actually makes B-movies anymore—at least not as they were originally intended. B movies once meant the cheap, shorter flicks with lesser-known actors that a movie studio packaged along with its A movie, newsreel and cartoon short back in the days when people went to the movies for an entire evening. Later, once that practice went the way of the dodo, B movies were the ones made by cheapie studios to fill up the second half of a double feature at a theater or drive-in. Those days too have been dodo'ized.

Today the closest thing you have to "B movies" are direct-to-DVD cheapies usually sequels to flicks that did not do well enough at the box office to support a theatrical release. In science fiction, I'll direct you to the two *Starship Troopers* sequels, both of which are classic "B movies" in production value, but which ultimately lack that essential B movie vibe. It's a different production and distribution dynamic and it makes for a different sort of cheap, disposable movie. Not better or worse, just different.

3. B-movies are an excellent place to see people on their way up. My favorite example of this on the "BMC" site is *Dark Star*, the first full-length feature by director John Carpenter, who would go on to rule the late '70s and early '80s with *Halloween*, *Escape from New York* and the remake of *The Thing*. *Dark Star* is also the debut of writer Dan O'Bannon, who co-wrote the script and would later go on to pen *Alien*, *Lifeforce* and *Total Recall*. Watching this flick, it's easy to spot the elements that would define the two filmmakers later on in their careers.

4. Conversely, you can also see how some legends made their names. On AMC's site you'll find names like Sonny Chiba and Peter Cushing, which are famous now not because they started in B-movies and went on from there, but because they stayed in B-movies to become favorites of geeky kids who would then go on to become filmmakers. Chiba (you'll find him on BMC in *Invasion of the Neptune Men*) is a favorite of Quentin Tarantino, who name-checks his chop-socky hero in *True Romance* and created a part for him as swordmaster Hattori Hanzo in *Kill Bill*. Peter Cushing, who wowed George Lucas in movies like *The Hellfire Club*, earned himself a role as Grand Moff Tarkin in *Star Wars* (itself a loving tribute to the B movie adventures and serials Lucas ate up as a kid).

Neither Quentin Tarantino nor George Lucas are trivial filmmakers, and both have made inarguably classic and influential movies. Could we be missing something by dismissing these flicks (and their actors) as "B movies"? Largely no—most B-movies are in fact negligible entertainments and cheesy fun at best. But it's also true that tastes change over time. In the case of both Lucas and Tarantino, they both made flicks that would have been indisputably "B" back in the Golden Age of Hollywood, but which are now indisputably "A." Tastes change, and these filmmakers helped change them, partly through their love of B-movies.

Having said that, I think I'll get back to *Dark Star* now. I love me some beach ball aliens.

—April 9, 2009 Next 55, Previous 93

Wachowskis and Lucas and Jackman, Oh My! Answering Your SciFi Questions

This past week my brain has collapsed like the proverbial flan in the cupboard so rather than think of a whole column topic, which is hard, I'm going to answer some e-mails I've gotten from readers, which is easy.

First, a letter from Karen:

> Last week you wrote that you thought the *Wolverine* film would do good but not great business (see page 123, Box Office Predictions for *Wolverine*, *Trek* and a Summer of SciFi). I think you're underestimating its potential, because you're forgetting about one large segment of the audience. The women who are going to the film to stare at Hugh Jackman.

Ah, yes, the Hugh Jackman Estrogen Brigade. And, well, who can blame them? When Jackman's all ripped and snarly and bearing the most impressive sideburns this side of the Civil War, even straight men start questioning themselves ("Hmmmm, maybe just this *once*."). Don't ask me how I know that one, incidentally. Also, don't tell my wife. *Please.*

That said, I'm not entirely sure the HJEB is all powerful because Jackman was pretty much all man candy in *Australia*, and look where that one ended up, box office wise. Maybe the sideburns are the key. In any event, while I don't discount the appeal of Jackman as an artfully torn T-shirt for some people, I'm not entirely convinced that those people will be the key to taking *Wolverine*'s ticket sales into the stratosphere.

Second, a letter from Bill:

> New reader catching up on your columns. They're great, except for all the Lucas hating. Seriously, what's up with that?

Good question. I don't hate George Lucas. In fact, I'm fond of saying that I think he's easily the most influential filmmaker of the last several decades, and possibly of all time. The modern cinematic experience is what it is because George Lucas has decided that's what it should be, and by and large I like the modern cinematic experience. I like seamless special effects, theaters with crystalline digital sound, and all the other back-end bits that Lucas and his minions either invented or championed. So we're done, George.

The problem is, in addition to being the most influential person on the back-end of the cinematic experience, Lucas also likes to write and direct. And, well, the best you can say about that is no one's good at everything. On the other hand, it was the writing and directing that allowed him to get to a point

where he had influence on filmmaking (and to be fair, the dude has two Best Director and two Best Screenplay Oscar nods), so what do I know. Clearly, I'm conflicted. But in the end, he gave us Pixar, which gave us *WALL-E*. So it's all good.

The next letter isn't actually a letter, but a comment from my wife after she watched *Speed Racer* (see page 175, $20 Million Now, $20 Million Then: How *Star Wars* Changed Movie Math) on cable last week.

> Hey, I actually liked that! I thought you said *Speed Racer* sucked! What's wrong with you?

I'm not entirely sure I said that *Speed Racer* was *horrible*, though I don't think I said it was *good*, either. I *did* say that I wasn't entirely surprised it didn't do well, because Anime Plotlines that work in badly-dubbed 60s Japanese animation don't necessarily translate to $150 million live action movies, and Warner Bros. did a botch job in marketing what was essentially a kiddie flick to *Matrix* audiences.

I found *Speed Racer* a bit of a mess the first time I watched it, but it's been growing on me with subsequent viewings. This is partly because it makes a bit more sense the second time around, and partly because—despite a very silly plot and a design scheme that resembles an exploding candy shop—the Wachowski Brothers are doing some interesting things relating to cinematic grammar. Most notably, I'm intrigued with the movie's time shifting story elements, overlapping images, and other such wackiness that's only available now through the advent of easily manipulable digital filmmaking.

The downside is that the screen is so jam packed with information all the time that you get visual overload, especially if you don't spend a lot of time, say, playing video games. That said, I wouldn't be entirely surprised if some of things the Wachowskis play with here get wider use in the future as audiences get used to this sort of information dump.

It's a bit weird to have all that going on with *Speed Racer*, but hey, *Star Wars* was kind of goofy, too, and look how influential that's been. And we're back to Lucas again.

—April 30, 2009 Next 57, Previous 123

Steampunk, *Star Trek* and *Salvation*—Answering More SciFi Questions

Hey kids! My ThinkTron 3000 (your people call it a "brain") has melted out of my ears and I can't come up with a topic this week. You know what that means: To the mailbag!

First e-mail.

> Why hasn't steampunk hit it big in movies yet? It seems perfect for the movies, visually.

You'd think so, wouldn't you? For those of you not in the know, "steampunk" is a type of science fiction that imagines what the world would be like if we had today's technology retrofitted for the Victorian era. So, lots of steam-powered technogadgets (thus the name) and groovy waistcoats and ascots. It's visually awesome stuff and really does seem well suited for the spectacle of the silver screen.

And yet steampunky movies have been critical or commercial flops. The most successful would have to be *Wild, Wild, West*, which made $100 million despite being absolutely terrible (thanks to star Will Smith). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* flailed domestically ($66 million box office on a $78 million budget), was disowned by creator Alan Moore and was such a stressful shoot that director Stephen Norrington essentially abandoned Hollywood for almost a decade. Then there's 2004's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, which, despite being the first "total green screen" movie, took a dive on the silver screen.

What all three of these major movies have in common, aside from their steampunkery, is the fact that they're all awful. Badly written, badly directed stuff that looks great but doesn't go anywhere. The fact that they're so bad—and generally performed poorly—will probably kill steampunk on the big screen for the foreseeable future.

Second e-mail.

> You said you liked the new *Star Trek* film, but how could you sit through it when the actual science was so bad? You know it's bad. You said so on your blog. I thought you called yourself a scientist!

If I called myself a scientist, my friends with actual science degrees would kick my butt. But yes, the science in the new *Star Trek* is epically bad, particularly with the bits involving black holes and that most lazy plot device known as "red matter."

Why I'm able to tolerate it: Well, come on. *Star Trek* science has *always* been epically bad; hasn't it? It's been bad in the movies since the explanation of how Khan got halfway across the universe in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. The various TV series were never any better. I was always amazed in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that Geordi LaForge had not won the Nobel Prize for discovering so many new subatomic particles and then immediately making beams out of them, and routing the beams through the warp nacelles, etc.)

There is no reason the science in *Star Trek* needs to be as aggressively wrong as it is. But we're 43 years, five series and eleven movies in, you know? It's a little *late*. You might as well get hung up on how Kirk goes from being suspended from Starfleet Academy to captain of the Federation flagship in about the same amount of time it takes the rest of us to order lunch from Taco Bell. And on that path lies *madness*.

Last e-mail:

> *Terminator Salvation* got panked by *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*. How did *that* happen?

This is referring to the fact that over the Memorial Day weekend, the new *Terminator* movie made $51 million while the *Night at the Museum* sequel brought in $70 million.

First things first: $51 million for four days (and $65 million for five days, since *Terminator* opened on Thursday) is nothing to sneeze at. It seems reasonably likely that this *Terminator* will match *Terminator 3*'s domestic gross (about $150 million) and even more likely will outperform it internationally. I personally thought it would do better, but it's no flop.

It's also not entirely surprising *Night at the Museum* was on top. The first *Museum* flick made $100 million more in domestic box office than *Terminator 3* and came out more recently, so its built-in support was bigger and fresher. Second, despite its PG-13 rating, *Terminator Salvation* is no "family film" whereas the whole clan could get out to see *Museum*. Third, *Museum* had the box office boost of IMAX screens, for which people pay more. Finally, *Museum* was on 500 more screens last weekend than *Terminator*, which translates to a significant advantage—even if *Terminator* had made the same amount per theater as *Museum*, it still would have made $10 million less. Add that all up and the box office disparity makes more sense.

—May 28, 2009 Next 95, Previous 185

Relax! *Transformers* Is Not the End of Cinema as We Know It

Here's a rather despairing e mail I received this week

> I am of the opinion that *Transformers Revenge of the Fallen* is proof of the total demise of the art form known as "c nema" Tell me I m wrong Also tell me how a movie based on toys actually qualifies as science fiction.

In the interest of disclosure, I've not yet seen *Revenge of the Fallen* But will this stop me from giving an opinion? Hell, no.

Second question first Sure, it's science fiction It's got *giant robots from space* We put robots *into* space but giant robots *from* space? That's not something you see in the real world, much less g ant robots from space who can fold themselves into GM products Thus Sc ence fiction I think the question here is really whether *Tran formers* would qual fy as good science fiction, and the answer is, I very much doubt it Independent of any other qua ities the movie might or might not have, as science fiction it's based on a line of toys, and the filmmakers have to work backwards to try to make any sort of realistic sense of their exis tence Geeks cal this "retconning," whic h s shal we say, hard work

So the question becomes whether the filmmakers are interested i n doing that hard work which a yone who has seen the first *Tran formers* will know they are not Screenwriters Alex Kurtzman and Robert Orci are good at snark and humor, but their acquaintance with actua science is iffy at best see The atest *Star Trek* which is fun but has winding y awful science As for director Michae Bay, he has yet to direct a movie that can be described as anyt ng but deeply and arrogantly dumb Its m ddly terr fy ng, in fact that the first *Tran formers* is likely the most clever movie he's ever made (that t p to Kurtzman and Orci here).

Now it is entirely poss ble that Bay Kurtzman and Orci (and Ehren Kruger, who is added on as a screenwriter), have actually managed to get the science and the log c of this latest *Tran formers* movie to the point that it's reasonable science fiction Given the r various track records however it seems highly doubtful

And, of course why should they? The first *Transformers* made over $ 700 million worldwide. Michael Bay has been outrageously successfu making one profoundly stupid movie after another and Kurtzman and Orci's complete dis regard of logic and science certainly hasn't stopped them from writing highly successfu sc ence fiction For these filmmakers there is no downside to writing and directing bad scr (well except for *The Island*) The audience for *Transform ers* doesn't actually care if the science tracks, they're there for the spectacle

Which gets us to the first point I understand my correspondent's despair that the stud o that once released *The Godfather* is reduced to high ighting a movie based on children's toys as its highest achievement for the year But let's

also point out that while *The Godfather* was the highest grossing movie of 1972 making it both a critical and commercial smash the number two flick that year was *The Poseidon Adventure* which was the sort of brain-free effects laden popcorn shoveler that the *Transformers* movies are today Also in the twenty top grossing movies of 1972 *The Getaway* (arguably Sam Peckinpahs worst *The Valachi Papers* (an unimspired Charles Bronson act on flick) *The Cowboys* (one of John Wayne's later and lesser movies) *Skyjacked* another disaster picture starring Charlton Heston) and *Deep Throat* Yes, the porno

So while not excusing the *Transformers* filmmakers for very likely making a loud and dumb flick, it should be noted that 'loud and dumb' *i.e.*, spectacle—has been packing theaters for as long as there's been cinema with sound Trust me if someone could have made exploding CGI robots in the 30s '50s or '70s they certainly would have And while today's movie distribution dynamic privileges loud and dumb flicks over quiet and thoughtful ones, it's also worth noting that filmmakers are nevertheless managing to make smart and spectacular movies too see *The Dark Knight* and *WALL-E* from last year Which is to say smart filmmakers adapt to the market that exists and manage to make good pictures regardless.

So no *Transformers* is not the end of cinema as we know it Going to see it may kill off a few brain cells, but it won't kill off filmmaking Promise

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Rating SciFi Movies by Their EXPLOSIONS!

This Saturday it's July 4, when America celebrates its independence from Britain by blowing things up real good. Nothing says "We, as a nation, aspire to be a beacon of democracy and equal rights" like a truly boom-tastic explosion. Since such outsize displays are on the minds of Americans everywhere, I thought I would give over this week's column to a critical review of explosions in science-fiction movies. Because, you know, why not?

***Star Wars* (1977)**

To be sure, there were explosions before *Star Wars*, from the cheap exploding spacecraft in *Flash Gordon* to the more expensive exploding craft in *Silent Running*. But it was in *Star Wars* that the Big Damn Explosion really burst onto the scene as a science fiction staple. What's more, *Star Wars* features not one but two really big explosions. The planet Alderaan getting zapped by the Death Star, and then the Death Star itself going blooey after a proton torpedo enema. Of the two, I always thought the Alderaan explosion was more impressive. But then, the coolest explosion in the whole movie belongs to the last TIE fighter that dies chasing the Millennium Falcon after it escapes the Death Star. Seriously, go look for yourself.

Explosion Rating: A

***Superman* (1978)**

Not content to just blow up a plane, this movie blows up a star *and* a planet! Not to mention, if you'll recall, unleashing a thermonuclear device on California—an event that is, curiously, underplayed.

Explosion Rating: B

***Alien* (1979)**

Ripley blows up the *Nostromo* to kill a single alien. The ultimate example of using an ax to kill a fly, if you ask me. Be that as it may, the explosion is awesome since the ship blows up not once, not twice, but three times—each explosion more spectacular than the last. A truly underappreciated exploding event in the history of science fiction.

Explosion Rating: B+

***Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* (1983)**

Yes, *The Empire Strikes Back* was the best written and directed of the original trilogy, but on the explosion front, it was, shall we say, underwhelming. TIE fighters? An Imperial walker? A power generator? Weak sauce. Not so with *Jedi*, which blows up Jabba's yacht, a shield installation, Imperial cruisers, dozens upon dozens of fighter ships, yet another Death Star and—critically—at least one Ewok. Really, this is a high point, if not *the* high point, in science fiction exploderation. The explosion special effects people should get an Oscar. THAT EXPLODES.

Explosion Rating: A+

***Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)**
Remember how the *Superman* movie detonated a nuclear bomb in California, but never really did anything with it? Well, this one knows how to handle a thermonuclear device over L.A. Not only does it wipe out downtown, it also sets fire to a playground—kids included—which took chutzpa on the part of James Cameron. Also, it transforms Linda Hamilton into a fence-clutching skeleton long enough for you to freak out, but not so long that you ask "Hey, what's holding those bones together?" Well done, Cameron.

Explosion Rating: B+

***Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991)**
The last original cast movie isn't generally considered an "explosion" flick by the general public, but aficionados know that when the Klingon moon Praxis blows up in the opening scene it squirts out a distinct shock wave that's so visually impressive that George Lucas added one just like it to the Death Star explosion in his 1997 *Star Wars* reissue. Now everyone thinks *that's* where it came from. Not so, George Lucas is a stealer. (Well, in fact, both movies were done by Lucas's effects house, Industrial Light & Magic. But still.)

Explosion Rating: B

***Independence Day* (1996)**
The White House is blown up. Lots of other stuff blows up, too—and rather impressive stuff, including L.A., New York, Houston, and, well, pretty much every other major metropolitan area on the planet. But no one gives a damn about that. Dude, they blew up the White House. There's symbolism there, man. Note: the symbolism plays slightly differently in the post-9/11 world.

Explosion Rating: A-

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Five Lessons From the SciFi Summer That Was

This upcoming weekend marks the traditional end of summer, and I ask you: What productive thing did you do with your summer? If your answer is "not a damn thing," you fool: it's *summer*, then I congratulate you. Well done. However, Hollywood had a productive summer, science fiction even more so, and as the kids go back to school, it's time for us to tally up some of the lessons we've all learned.

Lesson 1: Stupid SciFi Still Flies: When *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* and *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* –two of the objectively stupidest movies in human memory– gross half a billion domestic dollars between them, you can either despair that America's failing educational system has led us to this moment, or recognize that escapism has ever been with us, that these are this year's models, and that the people walking into the theater were not exactly expecting a heady intellectual experience, so, you know, *relax*. Hey, there's a recession going on; people *want* not to think for a while. That said, *Transformers* is indeed aggressively stupid, and one suspects director Michael Bay actually enjoys the idea that at this point, even just saying his name out loud is enough to cause normal human brain cells to die.

Lesson 2: Smart SciFi Gets Lots of Press: When the terrific *District 9* came out of nowhere to grab a $37 million opening, writers and pundits wet themselves a bit declaring how it was the future of armed science fiction, sort of conveniently forgetting:

A. The movie had a genuinely masterful marketing campaign.
B. It banked on massive geek goodwill for producer Peter Jackson,
C. It opened in August when not much else was going on, and
D. It will still probably make less than either *G.I. Joe* or *G.I. Force*, much less *Star Trek* or *Transformers*.

Deep breaths, everyone. Same with *Moon*, which got a huge amount of press and $5 million box office, although to be fair it really is probably the best science fiction movie of the year so far, so there.

Lesson 3: SciFi Doesn't Need Celebrities: This is something we've known since the original *Star Wars*, but it's always good to be reminded. *Transformers* made $400 million domestically, but no one thinks it's because of screaming masses of Shia LaBeouf fans. *Star Trek* purposefully cast unknowns. *G.I. Joe*'s biggest stars were Dennis Quaid and Marlon Wayans, which is terrifying if you think about it. And *District 9* literally featured no actor you had ever seen before, unless you were South African, and even then, it was a crap shoot. The science fiction movies that did have stars in them? *Land of the Lost* was a flop. *Terminator: Salvation* underperformed domestically, and *X-Men Origins: Wol*

verne, while sucking up $180 million in business, had a star who's only really a star in *X-Men* movies.

This is excellent news for Hollywood, incidentally, since huge stars are expensive and drive up the already insane production costs. It's less good for stars, since one of Hollywood's primary engines is these special-effects laden extravaganzas. That said, Will Smith will still get a silly amount of money for the next science fiction movie he decides to star in.

Lesson 4: People Really Wanted to Love *Star Trek* Again: Just before the new *Star Trek* came out, I was interviewed by a reporter who asked me if the new movie would incorporate the famous *Star Trek* moral themes, including tolerance, diversity and so on. My reply was that the mission of this *Star Trek* movie was simply to get butts in seats, and after it did that, maybe the sequels would touch on all their stuff. And that's pretty much how this one worked out: the reboot let people who dropped off the *Star Trek* bandwagon an easy way to climb back on, gave them back the original characters they cared about (more or less) and wrapped it all up in a bow made of pretty effects and explosions. And because the movie made it easy, the series got *everybody* back. This was the most successful *Trek* even after adjusting for inflation. Apparently everyone's a Trekkie (or if you're stuffy, a Trekker) deep down inside.

Lesson 5: Family-Friendly SciFi is a Good Bet: *Monsters vs. Aliens* cruised to just under $200 million in business. *Up*, which I think of as fantasy but with sci-fi elements, did close to $290 million, and the conceptually rather appalling *G-Force* (they're guinea pigs! They're spies!) zipped past $100 million without too much problem. It's hard (but not impossible) to go wrong with family-friendly sci-fi (witness *Aliens in the Attic*, which stiffed at a $22 million box office), but the concept of giving a whole family a science fiction experience seems to be firing on all cylinders.

Any Hollywood sci-fi summer lessons I missed?

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The Best and Worst Television Adaptations of SciFi Classics

I'm going to engage in a bit of shameless self promotion and tell you that this Friday marks the debut of *Stargate Universe*, a television show for which I am the Creative Consultant, and if you wouldn't mind watching it (whilst, of course, setting your DVR to record AMC's scheduled offering *Field of Dreams*, and promising to watch all of it *including the commercials*), I would be deeply appreciative. Appalling personal advertisement out of the way, the debut of *Stargate Universe* is also notable because the television series has cinematic roots in 1994's *Stargate* directed by Roland Emmerich, who would go on to make *Independence Day* and the upcoming *2012*. And while *Stargate* has been the most successful science fiction movie-to-television crossover (*SG-1* is the third series that can trace its ancestry back to the movie), of course it's not the only one, a number of science fiction flicks have beamed down from the silver screen to the the small screen. How did they do? Let's take a look.

Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: Defrosted astronaut Buck Rogers debuted in a comic strip, but made the jump to movies in a 1939 serial from Universal Pictures starring Buster Crabbe. Rogers actually jumped to TV twice. Once in 1950 for a single season on ABC, and for which no recordings exist, and then in 1979 for NBC, in the rather more well known series starring Gil Gerard. NBC actually released the series pilot to movie theaters, where it did the modern equivalent of $60 million at the box office—enough for the network to greenlight the project, which would last for two seasons. Incidentally, Buck Rogers may head back to the big screen. Frank Miller (*The Spirit*) is reportedly prepping a new version.

Flash Gordon: Take everything I wrote about Buck Rogers above and apply it here to this rock-turned planet saver, including comic strip incarnation, 1930s movie serials also starring Buster Crabbe, 1950s single season TV series starring Steve Holland, and disco-era theatrical release, the 1980 camp classic featuring Sam Jones, Max Von Sydow and the music of Queen. Flash's most recent television foray was on the Sci Fi Channel (now Syfy) in 2007, where it lasted again for just a single season.

Logan's Run: The 1976 movie in which a man runs from a civilization where you get blown up at the age of 30 was made into a 1977 series for CBS. The show made a number of changes from the movie, including having the civilization being run by a secret cabal of old people, and giving Logan a kicky android sidekick, but it didn't matter. The series's crystal flashed after just 14 episodes.

RoboCop: Paul Verhoeven's great 1987 movie had two tragically crappy sequels as well as this 1994 Canadian television series, in which the truly awesome ultraviolence of the movies was squashed to make the show teen friendly. This worked about as well as you would expect, and when combined with the high per episode production cost, the series lasted a single season.

Alien Nation: In the far off year of 1991, aliens live among us! And ruin drugs! And dissolve in salt water! The 1988 flick paired a human and alien cop to solve a crime, and did only moderate business. But it was enough to convince the then scrappy Fox Network to commission a series in 1989. Though it lasted just a single season—which had as much to do with Fox's own precarious situation as it did with ratings—the show continued on after cancellation though five successful made-for-TV movies.

Total Recall 2070: *Total Recall*, as you may recall, was a huge hit in 1990, in which the memory impaired Arnold Schwarzenegger ends up starting a revolution on Mars. But do you recall the 1999 television series *Total Recall 2070*? It was set up as a prequel to the events of the movie, but was in reality only tangentially related to anything, instead borrowing a couple of elements from the flick and then going off to do its own thing. It lasted a single season before falling down the memory hole.

Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius: Don't mock it—it was nominated for an Oscar (the inaugural Best Animated Feature award, which went to *Shrek*). Similar to the 1979 *Buck Rogers*, this 2001 movie about a big headed boy genius was originally a TV series pilot, but was promoted to the big screen when executives at Nickelodeon liked what they saw. It was smart decision. The flick did $80 million in business and helped propel the television series to three seasons of animated goofery, with a spin off series *Planet Sheen* scheduled for 2010.

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Why a Few Awesome Scenes Are Not Enough in SciFi Flicks

Because the Internet is filled with wonders, the other day I found this an 11,000 word scholarly exegesis of the "Duel of the Fates" scene from *The Phantom Menace* —i.e., the scene where Darth Maul, Qui-Gon Jinn, and Obi-Wan Kenobi have their totally kick-ass lightsaber duel. For those of you who choose not to follow that link, the very short form of the piece is that, according to the author, from a formal and cinematic point of view the scene is "one of the most impressive action sequences of recent memory, the best of all the pure lightsaber duels in the *Star Wars* films and as strong a contender as anything else for the greatest movie sword-fight of all time."

I have two things to say to this:

1. Wow, dude, way to entirely overthink a scene where quirkily dressed men with bad haircuts go after each other with glowing swords, but then that's why we have the Internet.

2. Whether one buys the full exegesis, the conclusion is largely correct. "Duel of the Fates" is easily the best and most exciting scene in its movie—so good, in fact, that it seems lifted from an entirely different film, rather than the joyless, sodden expositional mess known as *The Phantom Menace*. And this is what interests me: that, lodged within a bad film—and *The Phantom Menace* is a bad film—is this really great scene. Not only a scene that is exciting and fun but is also formally well composed and in its way proof that the filmmaker actually has cinematic chops. He knows his medium and its potential and uses that knowledge to knock one out of the park for the audience. Which, of course, makes all the rest of the film even more frustrating in retrospect. If George Lucas, or any filmmaker, can do that for one scene, why can't he do it for the rest of the film?

Lucas is far from the only science fiction filmmaker guilty of "bad film, great scene" filmmaking. In recent memory, the Wachowski brothers have done it in both of their *Matrix* sequels: the freeway chase in *The Matrix Reloaded*, which is one of the best chase scenes in science fiction film, and the invasion of Zion in *The Matrix Revolutions*, which takes the cinematic language of *anime* and fuses it to live action in a way that's very close to brilliant.

Another example: the opening sequence of *Vanilla Sky*, in which the sight of Tom Cruise's character in a empty Times Square so smartly sets the scene for his problem that the rest of the film seems almost entirely unnecessary. Even the lowly *Resident Evil* has a grossly over-performing scene: the laser-filled hallway and its imaginative slice-and-dice qualities. There are other examples—we could be here all day—but the point, I think, is amply made.

It's not just science fiction filmmakers who are guilty of the "one great scene" thing—look at horror films sometimes—but it does crop up in this genre more

than most others. Why is that? One reason has to do with the nature of science-fiction filmmaking itself. Science fiction is in general a more spectacularly visual genre than others. Right from the beginning, it's primarily used special and cinematic effects rather than story and character to wow its audience. If you don't think science-fiction filmmakers know this and capitalize on it, consider the fact that in each of the scenes I mention above the actors are silent or very nearly so. By stripping away the things these films and filmmakers generally do poorly or at least less well—character, plot, and dialogue—they can focus on what they are excellent at and dazzle us thereby.

But another reason is that science-fiction audiences let filmmakers get away with it. The people I know who came out of *The Phantom Menace* tended to say that the film had only two scenes worth watching—the aforementioned and the pod race—another low-dialogue visual scene—but that those scenes were really cool. As bad as *Phantom* was, these two scenes were sufficient in some ways to excuse the rest of the film. Lucas would use this. "Well, the movie was bad, but that scene was cool." That rationalization that science fiction audiences employ in the other two films of the prequel trilogy as well, banking on Yodas spinning lightsaber acrobatics in *Attack of the Clones* and Obi-Wan and Anakins climactic duel in *Revenge of the Sith* to give to us the reward we're supposed to get. It's a crutch, in other words. But inasmuch as audiences give science-fiction filmmakers that crutch to use, I don't know how much you can blame the filmmakers when they use it.

Be that as it may, watching the "Duel of the Fates" scene again reminded me both of how much I enjoyed that scene and how much I wished the film lived up to it. Awesome scenes are awesome, but I go to the movies to see movies, not just scenes.

—November 3, 2010 *Next 157, Previous 275*

We're Atwitter About Science-Fiction Films!

I often answer reader questions here in this column, but this week I'm doing it with a twist. I called for science-fiction- and fantasy-film related questions on Twitter and promised to answer them at Twitter length (i.e., in 140 characters including spaces and punctuation). How did it work out? You'll see below.

Teresajusino: Would you let your 12 year old daughter see *Sucker Punch*?
A: Heck, I've let her see *Starship Troopers*. (She wasn't impressed, by the way.) She should handle *Sucker Punch* just fine.

Maantren: Why was it *Star Wars* and not *Logan's Run* that changed everything?
A: *Logan's Run* was just more of the early seventies dystopic film thing that was winding down. *Star Wars* was a whole new ball of fun.

ThatNeilGuy: Is there any possibility that the recently announced *Blade Runner* sequel will not suck?
A: Possibly, but you should probably steel yourself for *Blade Runner 2: The Quickening*.

Tanglebonitis: Do you think that a gritty urban fantasy like China Mieville's Bas-Lag cycle has a chance of being made into a movie anytime soon?
A: I think it would be better suited for an HBO mini-series, don't you? And, yes, I would totally watch that.

Christurkel: Cage match: Lucas vs. J.J. Abrams.
A: Draw, with both collapsing from exhaustion after 90 seconds. They're nerds, man. Cage matches are not what they're about.

1in9: What, in your opinion, is the movie that's handled time travel the best, strictly from a science perspective?
A: None, because, unless you're a tachyon, science generally looks askance at time travel any direction but forward.

KBTibbs: Why do the future and/or other planets look so much like the seventies?
A: Because no one believes that anyone in the future will wear acid washed jeans, the primary sartorial gift of the eighties.

Glenn_scc: Do you go with the director version or theatrical version?
A: Seeing it for the first time: theatrical. And nine out of ten times, it's better than the director's cut anyway.

DocNielsen: Were you sad when Data died in *Star Trek: Nemesis*?
A: No, and that was the problem with the film: it was so bad that even killing Data didn't get a rise.

Deejayeetee: Who would win in the fight Gandalf vs. Magneto? (Other than EVERYONE.)
A: The split-screen special effects artists who will get paid overtime. Also Ian McKellen because, I suspect, that fight would amuse him.

JHGHendriks: Should there be a sequel to *The Dark Crystal*?
A: I'm not waiting up nights for it. No. But the chances I'll be asked by the potential filmmakers? Near zero.

Junglemonkey: Why can Jedis use the Force to stop things from falling on them but not to stop themselves from falling?
A: Because then they would be able to fly and would have to admit they are all secretly from Krypton.

SheckyX: To what do you attribute the extraordinary success of SF&F films in the past quarter-century or so?
A: Awesome special effects and the OCD of nerds that makes them go see their favorite movies six times in the theaters and buy all the merch.

RonHogan: How come Spider-Man and Batman and Superman all get reboots and we still haven't gotten our FIRST Dan Dare movie?
A: The failure of *Judge Dredd* scared Hollywood away from British comic book heroes (except Dredd, who's now being remade. RUN AND HIDE.)

FunkyScarecrow: Are SF&F-film fans who intentionally watch bad films to mock them wrong to do so? Does it just encourage bad filmmakers?
A: Bad filmmakers will make films regardless. And there are always more bad filmmakers ready to take their places.

Leeflower: Steampunk fantasy in the upcoming Three Musketeers movie: awesome, stupid, or awesomely stupid?
A: It's a Paul W.S. Anderson film, and if you know my opinion about his films in general you know my answer here. Hint: "awesome" is not it.

Witnessaria: Do you think depictions of high fantasy in TV and movies have improved in the last ten years? What filmmaking strategies have worked?
A: Screenwriters who can write their way out of a paper bag. That was the real triumph of *The Lord of the Rings* films.

Blukami: Will sci-fi ever be considered cerebral and not fanboy-junk?
A: Did you miss *Inception* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*?

Surlyadopter: Up-converted 3 D SF (and I suppose non SF+ action) movies. More to come or no more blood from that stone?
A: All the *Star Wars* films are scheduled to be up converted, so, yes, you'll have that for a while. Gird yourself!

BPonto: Why is advanced AI always seen to develop humanlike emotions such as the desire for subjugation or affection and love?
A: Because (a) it makes for interesting films and (b) we can't imagine computers wouldn't want to be *us*. I suspect we're wrong.

—March 30, 2011 Next 361, Previous 359

A Bestiary of Sequels, Three-quels, and Beyond

So you're a movie producer, and you've made a science-fiction or fantasy film, and that film has done well enough at the box office that you've been green lit for a sequel. Congratulations! Now it's time to choose what kind of sequel you want to have. Yes, I know—you say you want to make a *good* sequel. That's very nice. But there's the sequel you want to make, and then there's the sequel you *actually* make. Now choose from the list helpfully provided below.

The Perfectly Cromulent Sequel: This is the wise and cautious choice. This is one where the creative team says "Let's do everything we did in the first movie, but at 110 percent!" which translates to everything you did in the first movie at 85 percent. But that's enough for a huge opening weekend and a perfectly decent overall box office. No one can complain—too much.
Example: *Iron Man 2*

The Undercooked Sequel: Hey, did we mention we want the sequel for summer, two years from now? That's enough time for a script, right? I mean, you were working on something already, right? What? Well, don't worry, the kids are going to love it anyway. We'll just put in an extra $30 million in effects. No one will notice!
Examples: *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *Batman Returns*, *Men in Black II*

The Better-Than-the-Original Sequel: You had to jump through studio hoops to get the first movie made, but now you have the box office clout to do it your way. And your way is better! Hire that brilliant novelist to write the backstory! Level up your screenwriters and maybe your director! Toss in some respected actors (who are not too expensive and maybe need some work) for your protagonist to bounce off of! Get some special effects that aren't as cheesy as they were in the first film! You deserve it. So do the fans.
Examples: *Spider-Man 2*, *Blade II*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*

The "We Have No Idea What We're Doing" Sequel: This is what happens when you aim for the better-than-the-original sequel, but miss really badly because (a) the filmmakers are in way over their heads, production-wise; (b) the filmmakers have no idea what made the first film popular and pick the wrong things to highlight; (c) key brilliant filmmakers are tossed and replaced by hacks; (d) no one really cares because there's just money to be made; or (e) some combination of any or all of the above. Result: a classic of bad.
Examples: *The Chronicles of Riddick*, *Highlander II: The Quickening*, *RoboCop 2*

The 'We Always Envisioned It As a Trilogy' Sequel: The first movie's such a hit that the studio wants to make two sequels. But that's expensive, and they just want to pay for one and a half. No problem: you'll just shoot the next two films at the same time and put them out six months or a year apart. No one will notice that you've strung a single movie across two films and padded out the films with a bunch of incomprehensible subplots and in-jokes no one can figure out or care about. In fact, they'll love it!
Examples: *The Matrix Reloaded*[1], *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*[2]

Made your choice? Excellent. Now choose one of the three following three-quels.

The 'We Have Too Many Plots and Characters' Three-quel: Because nothing exceeds like excess. Or so you have apparently been ordered to believe by the studio.
Examples: *Spider-Man 3*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*[3], any "We always envisioned it as a trilogy" third film

The 'We Don't Want to Admit We're Just Milking It at This Point' Three-quel: Look, everybody has bills to pay, okay?
Examples: *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*[4], *Blade: Trinity*[5]

The 'Let's All Try to Forget How We Messed Up the Sequel' Three-quel: You don't want to remember, and neither does the audience.
Examples: *Batman Forever*, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (one assumes), *Men in Black III* (editor's note: the upcoming Riddick film (oh, God, please).

What? You're *still* around? For the fourth, fifth, and beyond, select from the following.

Ride the Gravy Train: You've got a franchise! Ride it until it grinds into dust.
Examples: Every *Star Trek* movie between *The Wrath of Khan* and *Nemesis*.

Book Series: Very much like Ride the Gravy Train, except you have the possibility that it won't just flab out at the end. But remember, the last book in the series? Two films.
Examples: Harry Potter and *Twilight* series.

Pull Out: Who needs an ensemble when everyone's just there to see Wolverine get pissed?
Example: *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*[6]

Prequel: All the stuff everyone liked—but earlier!
Examples: *X-Men: First Class*, *Star Wars: Episodes I–III*

Reboot: All the stuff everyone liked, all over again! Also darker and/or with jazzier camera angles.
Examples: *Star Trek* (2009), *Batman Begins*

Note that with each of the last three if you pull it off, you get a chance to start the sequel cycle all over again. And thus the Hollywood circle of life begins anew!

Well, until the third film (inevitably) disappoints everyone.
Hey, don't look at *me* like that. It's not *my* fault.

—June 8, 2011 Next 35, Previous 205

The Humdrum Summer and Why It's Okay

Here's an interesting business related letter I got earlier this week:

> Is it just me or does it seem like movies aren't making as much money as they used to? The big summer movies so far don't seem to be having as big opening weekends as I remember them having before.

Indeed, the big summer movies, including those of a science-fiction or fantasy nature, are down a bit from previous years at least domestically—although "down" is something of a relative term. For example, the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean* installment is likely to be the least successful of that series at the domestic box office. But it had a $90 million opening weekend (the 22nd best of all time), it's made over $200 million so far and it will likely hit $250 million here at home before it wanders out of the theaters. We should all underperform so well.

I knew, *Thor* has not scaled the financial heights this year that *Iron Man* did a few summers ago, but it'll end up in the neighborhood of $180 million domestically—a sum generally considered to be in hit territory. Ask most filmmakers if they would like to have produced a movie that makes $180 million, and they'll say "Oh yes please." And they would be right to do so.

Relative, not, however, the box office numbers don't hit the heights they have before. What's the cause? I have a few thoughts on the matter, naturally.

1. Sequel blahs: Outside of science fiction and fantasy, sequels are chugging along fine (note the performances of both *The Hangover Part II* and *Fast Five*—but within these genres things are sort of so-so, with the aforementioned *Pirates* film and also *Kung Fu Panda 2* chugging along fine but not spectacularly. I personally suspect that the upcoming Transformers pic will underperform relative to the previous movies in the series. In the cases of *Pirates* and *Transformers*, at least, part of that has to do with the fact that these films are following installments that weren't actually very good, the last *Pirates* film was confusing and had to fight through on what felt like several dozen storylines, while the last Transformers film was just flat-out stupid.

But I think it's also because there's a general feeling from audiences that they've seen everything these series have to offer (see page 32, A Bestiary of Sequels, Threequels, and Beyond). They're are at the point where familiarity breeds—if not contempt—at least a certain lack of urgency, which translates into "It's okay for me to miss it in the theater." The one movie I think may beat this phenomenon this summer is the final Harry Potter film because it is the last in the series, which will go out with a bang, making it worth seeing on the big screen (but not necessarily in 3-D, which I will get to).

2. Comic-book-rebuilding year: With the exception of *X Men: First Class* (which has suffered some of the sequel blahs noted above) most of the comic book series currently in production are in an off year. Batman and Iron Man are nowhere to be seen, and Spider Man's reboot isn't quite ready yet. So what we have is a year where the studios are trying to launch new heroes in an era when the superhero segment of the industry is already pretty saturated. It's not impossible, but it's more work than it was before, and both DC and Marvel have already run through their A list characters and are working to get you excited about a lower tier of heroes. (Hey, my favorite DC character is Green Arrow, so don't look at me like that.) The studios aren't stupid, and they know that this year is a rebuilding year. That is to say, if they give these new characters a decent launch, then you'll be excited for—and pay even more money to go see—the sequel a couple of years down the line.

This is a long process for them, in other words, and this year is just the first step—particularly for the folks at Marvel, who are planning to jam all their heroes into a single Avengers film that they clearly expect to vacuum up all the money in the known universe.

3. 3-D burnout: I went over this a couple of weeks ago (see page 205, The Return of 3D: International Edition), so there's no reason to go over it again in detail, but it's still a factor. Audiences are more discriminating about what films they really want to see in 3-D, and the answer seems to be "Not too many of them."

But if you're planning to feel bad for the movie studios about their relatively modest movie returns this summer, don't. Nearly all the big summer films so far this year are doing better in the international box office than they are here at home. (In the case of the new *Pirates*, it's the most financially successful of the series, internationally speaking.) So the studios are fine. The real lesson of the summer so far is that the domestic box office is even less a driver of a studio's bottom line than it was before.

—June 15, 2011 *Next 37, Previous 32*

Dear SF Film Makers: Give These Plot Points a Rest

And now, for no particular reason other than I get paid to write things like this in public, here are some science fiction tropes in movies that I would be happy to see filmmakers not use again for, oh, at least five or ten years or so.

1. Stone-faced government officials seeking and/or hiding aliens.
This one got trotted out again this year with *Super 8*, and was the most wearisome part of an otherwise pretty entertaining flick. Look, Area 51 and officious looking g-men and scads of government minions invading a town have had a good run, and back when they showed up in *E.T.*, they were still a little scary. But that was thirty years ago, and now when you see them you know they're the token opposition. Too easy. Move on.

2. The overwhelming alien invasion.
Most recently essayed in *Battle: Los Angeles*, but, of course, going all the way back to *War of the Worlds*. It's not that I don't enjoy watching apparently superior alien forces blow the hell out of large buildings while a rag-tag team of humans fights back, eventually finding whatever chink in the alien armor, be it the power source of the invading armada or a bunch of water glasses lying around the house, that will allow the humans to score a major victory and turn the tide against the alien horde. But as the previous sentence may suggest, the folks making these sorts of films are relying a little too heavily on one particular plot engine. No matter how you deck out the details it still runs the same.

3. The dreary, oppressive dystopia.
This year *Priest* ran with this one, chucking in a vampire plot twist in an effort to shake things up. It might have been more effective had not *Resident Evil* and *Ultraviolet* gotten there first. Most films with oppressive dystopias borrow heavily from *Blade Runner* or *The Road Warrior* or both; the problem is that, as with *E.T.*, both are three decades down the time stream now, which means filmmakers borrowing from them now aren't showing anything we haven't seen dozens of times already.

4. The very special youngster.
This is more often the domain of fantasy (hello, Harry Potter), but it was given a science fictional run through this year with *I Am Number Four*, and of course, *Star Wars* trotted out Luke, why yes he was. These run down a checklist: Orphaned? Of course! Having special powers waiting to be unlocked? Yes, indeed. Found and trained and protected by a wise mentor? How could it be otherwise? Hunted by the forces of evil? That goes without saying. When this very special youngster shows up, we know where he's going. Best to leave him in hiding.

5. Super heroes.

I know, I know. No chance of that. But I thought I would throw it out there. And actually, it's not so much super heroes that I'm bored with, than it is *origin stories*—which is to say, the whole set-up of how said super hero got his powers, how he fumbled a bit with them before he figured them out, how he felt alienated from the world, blah blah blah blah *blah*—man. I get tired just *thinking* about them at this point. You know, one of the very salient reasons why *Spider-Man 2* and *The Dark Knight* are considered better than their predecessors is that they didn't have to spend any time setting up the super hero; they could just focus on the story they wanted to tell. But of course it's difficult to get to those films without doing the set up exercises. It's a catch 22, it is.

—June 22, 2011 Next 299, Previous 35

Movie Production

Is Guillermo del Toro the Right Man for *The Hobbit*?

Most geeks are spittle-flinging happy that *Pan's Labyrinth* director, Guillermo del Toro, has signed on to helm *The Hobbit* (and its ill-defined and almost certainly ill-advised extra-canonical sequel, which I henceforth dub *The Hobbit 2: Electric Bugaloo*), but most geeks are also not Salon.com film writer Andrew O'Hehir. O'Hehir describes himself as a fan of the Peter Jackson directed *Lord of the Rings* series, and most de Toro films (*Mimic* rightfully excluded), but thinks the pairing of Jackson as producer and del Toro as director is bad news. O'Hehir's objections are A) del Toro's on record as loathing all things hobbitry and B) del Toro will be wasting the prime of his career carrying water for Jackson on a project Jackson should do himself.

Is O'Hehir right? Hell, no. And here's why:

Peter Jackson Isn't a Better Choice: Anyone who suffered through the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy (or *Godfather III*) will understand when I suggest that it's not always wise for a director to return to his old stomping grounds. Jackson left Middle-Earth as a hero to geeks and film investors (and on such a creative high note, he essentially slacked through *King Kong* and no one gave him any crap for it). That being the case, what's the upside for him to re-direct in Middle-Earth? If he does it perfectly and sticks the dismount, it's still not fresh. If he screws it up, the fan response will make the *Phantom Menace* backlash look like a group hug.

Jackson put a huge target on himself by agreeing to return to Middle-Earth, getting someone else to direct gets him out of the line of fire. Now, if it works, he'll still get producer's credit. If it fails, the audience will blame del Toro because among other things, he's not Jackson (or more accurately, the imaginary Jackson who did the film perfectly).

That said, I don't think Jackson hired del Toro just to aim flak toward someone else. I think he hired del Toro because Jackson's aware that, contrary to O'Hehir's worry, these films need someone who isn't very much in love with either Tolkien or the world that he made.

This has to do with the subject matter, namely *The Hobbit*. That book, written by Tolkien to amuse his kids, is a twee, but stuffed at best. Beloved, yes, but a bit squishy in the middle. This is fine for bedtime readings and Rankin-Bass animated adaptations, but for the contemplation of one of the most successful film series of all time, every installment of which was nominated for Best Picture? *The Hobbit* needs someone willing to slice through the fat and mush and not ask himself WWTD (What Would Tolkien Do?), at every critical juncture. Jackson did this with *The Lord of the Rings*, which is why, among other things, the film series is thankfully Tom Bombadil-free. But *The Hobbit* needs an extra wash of astringency. Del Toro's love of the fantastic has never descended into huggy cuteness, which makes him perfect to save *The Hobbit* from itself.

What del Toro Gets Out of the Deal: All that is nice for *The Hobbit* but what does del Toro get out of four years of indentured servitude to Peter Jackson in Middle Earth? He has his own projects lined up—a third installment of his Spanish history fantasies, an adaptation of H P Lovecraft and all of these get shoved to the back burner while he traipses about Hobbiton. This is a main concern of O Hehir's. That del Toro's blowing his own shot for greatness extending someone else's franchise.

The answer is simple. Del Toro's a visual genius and a better than fair stick at storytelling but he's also never cracked $100 million in the U.S. the closest he's come is the $82 million gross of *Blade II* another example of del Toro working for hire. In Hollywood, being a genius is nice, but regularly spurting out blockbusters is better which is why Michael Bay could get green lit filming himself picking his nose while del Toro still has to work to get a flick made.

If *The Hobbit* and *Hobbit 2: The Quickening* make money hand over fist—which they almost certainly shall—O Hehir will get his Spanish fantasy and his Lovecraft film each with more money and far better marketing than they would get without del Toro's Middle Earth adventure. Don't think del Toro's not well aware of this himself.

—May 8, 2008 Next 175, First

How to Make a (Good!) Science Fiction Movie (for Cheap!)

A question for you. In terms of production cost to box office gross, what is the most successful science fiction fantasy film of 2008 so far? (Hint: not *Speed Racer*.) If you guessed *Iron Man*, that would be a good guess. It cost about $150 million to make and so far has taken about $435 million worldwide, or about almost three times what it cost to make. But the real return on investment heavyweight for the year is already out on DVD: *Cloverfield*. Worldwide, it raked in $170 million—but it only cost $25 million to make—which means it brought in almost seven times production costs. That's the sort of return that makes movie executives tingle.

What *Cloverfield* shows us is that in this age of nine-digit film budgets, it's still possible to make a science fiction film that looks great, has all the bells and whistles that fans expect—and still costs less than what Will Smith gets paid. How do you do it? Here are three options, which can work singly, or in combination.

1. Ditch the Stars: So how much *does* Will Smith get paid to make a movie these days? Well, $28 million for *I, Robot*—or a quarter of that film's $105 million production budget (or $3 million more than all of *Cloverfield*). I'm a big fan of Will Smith personally, but that's a hell of a lot of money. *Cloverfield* has a bunch of actors most folks have never heard of, and got them for probably what the craft service budget was on *Iron Man*. It banked on making its monster its star—a smart move since they didn't have to pay the monster anything aside from letting it make a virtual Manhattan its buffet.

If you can't get away with the stars, the next best thing is to get genre-friendly TV stars and/or B-movie actors (see *Serenity*, $40 million, to make and *Pitch Black*, $23 million). Or if you must have someone recognizable make them British (see *Star Wars*, whose big names were Alec Guinness and Peter Cushing). Another strategy: Downsloping A-listers, which is how 1998's *Dark City* got both Kiefer Sutherland and Oscar winner William Hurt on a $27 million budget. Just don't take it too far. As a Gen Xer, it hurts me to say it, but Christian Slater at his very peak couldn't have saved *Alone in the Dark*. Of course, at his peak he wouldn't have been *in* it.

Occasionally a genuine A-list star might take a huge pay cut to make a science fiction movie, but it helps if your script is by Charlie Kaufman (see *Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*).

2. Don't Make It in Hollywood: Or if you *do* make it in Hollywood, don't make it for the major studios, make it for its indie arm. The major studio will insist on the A-list star and will give you the wherewithal to do crazy expensive stunts like, say, shutting down Times Square to have your expensive A-list star run through it while it's deserted (as Tom Cruise did in 1999's *Vanilla Sky*, $70

million production cost.) In contrast, when Cillian Murphy walked through a similarly deserted London at the beginning of *28 Days Later*, they didn't shut down London, they just shot in the early morning and just asked people stumbling out of all night clubs if they wouldn't mind not wandering into the shot. Production cost of *28 Days Later*? $8 million.

28 Days Later is the perfect example of an excellent science fiction film made cheaply because it wasn't made in Hollywood. It was made in Britain and funded in part by the UK Film Council, which didn't have huge sums to toss about, it was only distributed by Fox. But it had a top-flight director (Danny Boyle) and a pack of impressive British stars (Brendan Gleeson, Christopher Eccleston), and a kickin' story. And it certainly doesn't look worse than films that cost nine or ten times as much. At the very least, I'd rather watch *28 Days Later* than *Vanilla Sky*.

3. Hire the Screenwriter to Direct: The screenwriter is used to having his work brutally slaughtered by other filmmakers, so when he gets a chance to step up to the director's chair, he's going to do everything he can to make it work, no matter what. Warning, however: This is highly contingent on the two other factors. Case in point: David Twohy. When David Twohy had was $23 million, no big stars and a distribution deal with mini-studio USA Films, he made *Pitch Black*. When he had $120 million, big stars and Universal Studios backing him, he made *The Chronicles of Riddick*. Lesson: There's something to be said about keeping your screenwriter-director pinching pennies.

Now go! And make good, cheap science fiction films!

—May 22, 2008 Next 75, Previous 175

All John Scalzi Wants for Xmas Is Original SciFi

Hey, did you know it's Christmas? I know! It's like it happens every year or something. It's also one of the days of Hanukkah as well, so today's schedule is just plain *packed*. I don't know how many of you will be reading this on December 25th, but if you are, I'm going to share with you my Christmas wish.

My Christmas wish is for to Hollywood start making more original, big-event science fiction movies.

Which is to say, enough with the franchises, remakes and reboots. Let's get some new visions on the screen, okay?

Hollywood, if I may address you directly for a moment. Look, I understand. It's a recession, you have to send your movies out globally, and despite the image of your industry as a liberal hotbed of subversive madness, the fact is that when it comes to movie production, you're *incredibly* conservative with your money. You're going to put it into a sequel to an already popular flick rather than try to remake the wheel (and build a new audience). The ultimate argument for this is the results. Anyone could point to *The Dark Knight* or *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* as examples of this wisdom, but I say when Brendan Fraser stars in two $100 million grossing films, one the umpteenth remake of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and the other a *Mummy* sequel no one wanted, there's your proof.

So yes, I get it. I'm not asking you to kill your golden goose. But come *on*. Here's what's on tap for the major big-budget science fiction movies of 2009:

X-Men: Wolverine (3rd sequel)
Star Trek (10th sequel/reboot)
Terminator Salvation (3rd sequel/reboot)
Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen (sequel)

Original major science fiction releases for 2009? Well, there's the superhero deconstruction tale *Watchmen* in March and James Cameron's whatever-the-hell he's been up to for a decade *Avatar* in December, plus the animated spoof *Monsters vs. Aliens*. But while casting no aspersions on the potential quality of either *Watchmen* or *MvA*, I'm looking forward to both actually, those movies are the radically "meta," which is to say they rely on us having sucked down enough superhero and monster flicks in the past to get what they're trying to do. Basically, we have to know the genre to get the story, and that means *Avatar* is the only big sci-fi movie next year that we're walking into totally blind.

No offense to these other properties, but having only one movie next year that has a chance at surprising us—thereby planting a flag for the viability of science fiction as a cinema of ideas as well as a cash cow—sucks. No matter how

good *Terminator Salvation* is, it trades on themes and story lines we already know from the rest of the series. No matter how shiny J.J. Abrams makes the *Star Trek* reboot, the audience is going to spend as much time noting how it differs from the existing series as they're going to spend simply enjoying it.

Compare all this assumption and distraction with the experience audiences had watching *Star Wars* for the first time, or *Alien*, or the first *Terminator* or *The Matrix*, or even (going back a bit) *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes*. Each of these was a new experience—or at the very least, an assembling of old tropes and ideas in new, unexpected packages. And we all got sucked in, making most of them huge successes that spawned multiple sequels.

I'm not advocating Hollywood get out of the sequel business, since then we wouldn't have *The Empire Strikes Back* or *Aliens* or *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, which were excellent movies in their own right. And yes, even movie studios deserve to make money. I am just saying it would be nice to have a better ratio of new scifi flicks to sequels and remakes and reboots.

Is that too much for this science fiction junkie to ask? Just give it some thought, Hollywood. I'll be here waiting with my theater going cash in hand (which yes, I still have, even during this recession). Think of it as a potential Christmas gift for you, later, if I get what I want.

—December 25, 2008 *Next 121, Previous 119*

Odds Are, Your Favorite SciFi Novel Is Not the Next *Total Recall*

A few weeks ago, I wrote about the scifi books I'd most want to see made into a movie (see page 91: Some Candidates for the Next *Children of Men*). Then I got this letter from a reader:

> I was recently reading a science fiction book I really enjoyed (not one of yours, sorry) and I was wondering what the chances were of it ever being made into a big movie. I'd assume it's small.

You would assume correctly, dear reader, and let me explain why.

1. It's a simple matter of odds. Far more scifi books get published each year than movies are released from all the major Hollywood studios combined. A major studio will release about 20 to 25 pictures of all types and genres per year, of which two or three might be science fiction or fantasy. A single science fiction publisher like Tor Books, on the other hand, releases 90 original hardcover titles a year. Even if every single movie slot were filled with science fiction releases (which is an *optimistic*) the odds of your favorite scifi book being made into a movie would still be long.

2. Most science fiction movies are not based on novels. A quick glance at the 2009 releases shows its bereft of scifi novel adaptations. We've got scifi movies based on graphic novels, video games, toys and old TV shows. Science fiction novels? Well, *The Road* is supposed to get a release someday, and *The Time Traveler's Wife* is completed but not scheduled (note well also that both of those scifi movies are based on books not directly marketed as science fiction).

Scifi novel adaptations do happen. See *Jumper*, *Children of Men*, *A Scanner Darkly*, and *I, Robot* as recent, mostly successful examples, and Ridley Scott's recent acquisition of *The Forever War* shows that there's still a market for good scifi novels to make the jump. But Hollywood has lots of other places from which to grab their ideas.

3. Assuming that a producer is looking at science fiction novels as a basis for movies, how do they know where to look? The first place they look is where you would expect them to: The *New York Times* Bestseller list, since what lands there is already popular to some extent (and thus less of a risk to promote as a movie). A second place is less obvious: Tip sheets on upcoming books collated by companies that distribute these sheets to producers and agents. When an upcoming science fiction book gets a starred review in one of the publishing industry or library trade magazines like *Publishers Weekly* or *Booklist*, they get noted on tip sheets. (I speak from experience on this one.)

A third place they look is at what's worked before. In Hollywood, nothing succeeds like previous success, which is why Philip K. Dick (*Blade Runner, Total Recall, Minority Report*) does so well. The irony of PKD—whose work did not sell hugely while he was alive—being Hollywood's go-to sci-fi author while the massively successful Robert Heinlein has only a couple of lackluster flicks to his name is not lost on most science fiction readers.

What this all means for your favorite science fiction novel is that if it was not a bestseller and/or was not well reviewed in the trades, or your favorite author doesn't have a track record in Hollywood, filmmakers probably don't know that the novel even exists.

4. Despite all of that, let's say a producer loves your favorite science fiction book and secures an option to make a movie out of it. Does that mean it's headed to the silver screen? Probably not. Unless that producer has his or her own line of financing (and most don't), they'll need to go to a movie studio and pitch the project. Most of the time the studio exec being pitched will say "no," but even if he or she is interested, it just means that now the accountants will get involved and decide whether or not it makes sense for them to pour millions into the project. Again, the answer is often "no."

Even when it is a "yes" and the movie goes into pre-production, it can still fall apart. Stars can drop out, screenplays are endlessly rewritten, studio execs are replaced—and so on. The miracle of Hollywood is that any movies get made at all.

So when you don't see a movie based on your favorite sci-fi novel, don't feel too bad. It's not a comment on the book. It's a comment on Hollywood.

—February 19, 2009 Next 49, Previous 227

With *Star Wars* Soon In 3D, George Lucas Goes for Indomitability

Last year word leaked out that George Lucas had a plan to re-release all six *Star Wars* movies in 3D, so that finally you could have the Death Star explode right in your lap (or alternately, get a full tongue experience from Jar Jar Binks). This news has inevitably led to people asking why Lucas might do such a thing. After all, it's not as if he's hard up for cash, he'll not be re-releasing these flicks to make the mortgage payment on Skywalker Ranch. So what is Lucas thinking?

I have three explanations:

First, Lucas is the movie industry's alpha geek. His fascination with pushing new film technologies is so great that he helped create modern special effects processes with *Star Wars*, forcing John Dykstra to invent a new effects-oriented camera for example. He also once released a movie more or less as a technology beta test. In 1994's *Radioland Murders* (which you did not see, but I had to), he perfected the technique of creating computer generated sets, which he would later use in his 1997 re-release of *Star Wars*. Given this fact, it's only natural he'd choose to add once more with his flicks to bring them up to date with the latest tech.

Second, Lucas is re-releasing Star Wars again to breed yet another crop of fans. Disney perfected this strategy back in the days before home video, when they would re-release their animated flicks every seven to ten years in order to indoctrinate a new herd of kidlings. Thus *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, originally released in 1937, was re-released in '44, '52, '58, '67, '75, '83, '87 (the 50-year anniversary) and '93. *Star Wars* itself has had two official re-releases, first in 1982, and then the version in '97 that included new bells and whistles (and had Greedo shooting first, which as we all know was *wrong*). The '97 re-release racked in another $138 million to the movie's gross, greased the skids for *The Phantom Menace* and inculcated another generation of geeks into the *Star Wars* tribe. Another re-release would add a new geek crop to the fold, and ensure *Star Wars*' Vader-like grip on the nerds of the world continues unabated **for another 20 years.**

Now, both of these are good reasons, but let me offer a third, which is going to sound nuts, but go with me: *Gone with the Wind* is a war on Lucas' family.

And you say, *what*? How did we get to *Gone with the Wind*? Well, it's simple. The single most successful domestic box office movie of all time is not *Titanic*. Though it's currently atop the list of highest grossers, when you adjust for inflation *Titanic* slips to sixth on the list, and *Gone with the Wind*, with an adjusted $1.45 billion in box office receipts, supreme. What's number two? Why, *Star Wars*, **of course, with $1.28 billion adjusted.**

George Lucas—cinema's alpha geek, the dude responsible for the theater experience as we know it, do you like your THX certified theater? Who lives, breathes and excretes cinema, is a mere $150 million from having *Star Wars* his baby become the single most successful movie of all time. I ask you: Knowing

all we know about George Lucas, might this be something that's important to him? Considering that the '97 release of *Star Wars* added $138 million to the movie's gross (which, adjusted to today's ticket prices, equals about $195 million), do we really think it would be that difficult for a spiffy new 3D version of *Star Wars* to crop up another $170 million or so? Aren't you planning to see the 3D version? Oh, don't lie. You totally *are*. Search your heart. You know it to be true.

Yes, I know, this sounds nuts. But you know what? You're not George Lucas. You don't have George Lucas's money and motivation, or a means to put yourself on top of a list that, barring a fundamental redo of the way we handle movie distribution, no new release will *ever match*. Lucas doesn't have an Oscar—all he's got is one of those lousy Irving Thalberg awards*—but there's only *one* single most successful movie of all time. And when Lucas has it, he can look around and say "What? An Oscar? Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

—February 26, 2009 Next 51, Previous 47

Filming the Unfilmable in *Watchmen*, *Dune* and Beyond

Unless you've been living under a rock (or you just hate science fiction) you know that *Watchmen* comes out this weekend. I'll leave writing about the particulars of the movie to others (indeed, don't miss this column by fellow AMC-er Nick Nadel, on how flicks based on Alan Moore comics make Alan Moore very, very angry), but the thing I'd like to focus on is how it's mildly surprising there's a *Watchmen* movie at all. You see, for most of the time between the thematically dense graphic novel's 1986 debut and now, the going line on *Watchmen* was that it was unfilmable.

Which is not to say that people haven't tried. *Watchmen* was optioned as soon as it was published, with prominent directors like Terry Gilliam, Darren Aronofsky and Paul Greengrass attached to the project before *300*'s Zack Snyder finally sank his teeth in. It was Gilliam who first explained why it couldn't be made: "The problem with *Watchmen* is that it requires about five hours to tell the story properly, and by reducing it to a two or two-and-a-half hour film, it seemed to me to take away the essence of what *Watchmen* is about."

Whether Gilliam was correct or not is something science fiction and comic book geeks will discover for themselves this weekend, but the point to make here is that *Watchmen* isn't alone in being a literary sci-fi property that has at one point or another been labeled as unfilmable – even when (and sometimes even after) people have gotten it up on the screen. Here are some other examples:

Dune: Frank Herbert's book rammed together religion, politics, ecology, revolution and big honkin' space excreting annelids into a text so dense it threatens to implode into itself. When David Lynch took it on in 1984 (apparently without having read the book before agreeing to direct – bad) he added his own layer of weirdness to it, and the result was confusing enough that the studio felt obliged to offer flyers to moviegoers explaining what was going on. A 2000 TV miniseries of the book made substantially more sense, but felt flat and chintzy, not nearly conveying the scope of the book. But hope (and spice) springs eternal, as *Hancock* director Peter Berg is scheduled to take a swing at it – in the near future. Good luck.

Stranger in a Strange Land: Robert Heinlein's 1961 satire of religion is arguably the most influential science fiction novel of all time, but presents unique challenges as a movie, not the least of which is how to convince studios craving the financial sweet spot of a PG-13 rating that the world needs a flick featuring religion with sex as a sacrament and clothing optional group marriages. Then of course there's the old guy who lectures everyone who comes near him on morality, religion and basic interpersonal relationships. *Stranger* is not currently in any stage of production, but I would love to see what Darren Aronofsky could do with it).

The *Foundation* Series: Isaac Asimov's epic series of books are science fiction's closest answer to a Calvinistic sense of predestination (i.e., civilization is going to fall anyway, we're just trying to contain the splashback.) The series is chockful of ideas about human mass psychology which are something of a challenge to portray in a way that will both satisfy fans and popcorn munching masses. *Foundation* is currently optioned by Roland Emmerich, and it will be interesting to see if the maker of fun but brain-free offerings like *Independence Day* can thread this particular intellectual needle.

Ender's Game: Orson Scott Card's novel of an unwitting child warrior is one of the most popular science fiction novels of the last quarter century, and has been in various stages of pre-production and adaptation over the years. Its challenge, unlike so many other titles here, is not that it is a weighty tome or series. The major problem is that its main character is five. It's one thing to imagine in text a remarkably precocious five year-old; it's another thing to show one using an actual five year old actor. Sci-fi geeks are itchin' to see this on the silver screen anyway, and while at the moment *Ender* doesn't appear to be under option, it's only a matter of time.

And yes, I would go see these all.

—March 5, 2009 Next 53, Previous 49

Doom for Dummies or How Hollywood Makes Video Game Movies

Hey, look, more reader e-mail! This one asks

> Can you tell me why movies based on video games (science fiction or otherwise) are so very bad? Has there actually been a good video game-based movie yet?

First, for folks generally interested in video game movies, we have our own specialist, Anthony Burch, whose AMC column on the subject runs every other Tuesday. See how we cover it all for you? We do it for the love, people.

As for the e-mail directed at me, I'll take the second question first and say, no, there has not been a single video game movie that I personally would consider good. The best I can manage here is to say that there are a couple that exist in the "don't entirely suck" category. This is not to say there have not been financially successful video game movies. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* did especially well at the box office, although whether that was because of the legion of Lara Croft fans or simply that Angelina Jolie is smokin' HAWT in that little silver jumpsuit of hers is open to debate.

As to the first question, there are a number of reasons.

First, blame the Germans. Temporarily, recently the nation of Germany allowed for some nice tax benefits if its citizens invested in film production. This in turn benefited a German director named Uwe Boll, who went about snapping up the movie rights to a number of video game titles and cranking them out fast and cheap.

This was a nice set-up for Boll, since he's been able to make a nice living playing filmmaker. It wasn't nice for us, because Uwe Boll makes movies like monkeys drive trucks. Through Boll, the world is saddled with flicks like *House of the Dead*, *Alone in the Dark* and *Bloodrayne*, which all make you want to bleed from the eyeballs.

To be fair, Boll's not the only filmmaker with an unnatural fetish for game titles. Paul W. S. Anderson, who has a bit more skill and flair, has given us *Mortal Kombat* and *Resident Evil*, both of which exhibited some technical competence and attractive female stars, of course, but not much else. Now he's got the rights to *Castlevania* and *Spy Hunter*, and in both cases I wouldn't hold my breath for quality.

But this is the other problem. If you've ever watched a video game based movie, you get the sense that quality isn't actually on the filmmakers' minds, even when the thing isn't supposed to be a slipshod B movie funded by German dentists. I have a strong suspicion that in the mind of Hollywood, the average video game player is sixteen years old, has a double-digit IQ, and is only really interested in explosions, blood, and pneumatic women—so things like plot, characterization, and story are seen as optional.

In point of fact the average gamer is nearly thirty, not dumb and while he may enjoy bombs, blood and babes I'm willing to bet he'd happily see a movie that doesn't assume he's stupid. When I watched *Doom*, the scene where a scientist explained that a certain percentage of the human genome has never been mapped (and the part that hasn't we'll that's your soul, you see) made me want to throw a rock through my TV — which is ironic, as the film stars The Rock.

Finally, there's the problem that some video games just don't have much to hang a movie on, which leaves filmmakers obliged to make something up to fill in 90 minutes. One of the very first video game movies, *Super Mario Bros.*, is a case in point. The game features running, jumping and landing on turtles—not a lot to go on—so the filmmakers decided to place the movie in the world of Terry Gilliams *Brazil* and cast Dennis Hopper as a lizard. Why not, right? To say it doesn't work is an understatement; star John Leguizamo would later mention that he and co-star Bob Hoskins got drunk to get through the experience. This is also a viable strategy while watching it.

None of this suggests there can't be a good movie based on a video game. All you have to do is get a good filmmaker who puts the story first and aims for an audience with a brain. Which is to say, rather than making a video game flick, they make a good flick that happens to be based on a video game.

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A Case Study in Vanity, Courtesy of *Battlefield Earth*

"Hey," a friend said to me last week, "you know something about science fiction movies."

"Why, yes," I said. "Yes, I do."

"Then tell me," he said. "Is *Battlefield Earth* really as bad as everyone says it is?"

Oh my YES, *Battlefield Earth* is bad, and not just the standard issue sort of bad, like say, a Matthew Perry comedy; this one is the Grade A, genuinely epic sort of bad that fills movie critics' hearts with glee because now they can be especially creative in their condemnation. For example, this, from Rita Kempley at the *Washington Post*: "A million monkeys with a million crayons would be hard pressed in a million years to create anything as cretinous as *Battlefield Earth*. It's so bad that if you haven't seen it, you literally can't imagine it's as bad as everyone says, because how on Earth could a movie *that* bad get made? And then you watch it and you realize it's actually worse. And then you start laughing, because the alternative is to *implode into madness*."

Yeah, it's bad. As to *why* it's bad, one could point to a bad story, lousy script, clunky direction, hammy and/or affectless acting and cheesy production values—and indeed, most critics do. But that's missing the point. There is a more primal reason for the movie being bad, which is simply that this is a movie one person really, really, really wanted to make. It was, in other words, a vanity project.

And you say, well, aren't all movies vanity projects? In a sense, yes. Hollywood being as it is, someone often has to desperately want to make a project to see it through to the end. But there's a difference between that and the vanity project, in which a director or producer or star, having reached a point in their career where few would gainsay them, pushes all his chips onto a particular work no one else wants to make and says, "this is what I want to do."

This was the case with *Battlefield Earth* and its star, John Travolta. His attraction to the project is clear. The novel it's based on was written by L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, of which Travolta is a member. When the novel was first released, Hubbard sent Travolta a signed copy and had reportedly hoped the star would one day adapt it.

Travolta had a hard time convincing anyone to make *Battlefield*. Most studio folks were spooked by the potential cost of an effects-laden sci-fi extravaganza, unimpressed with the novel and concerned by the public perception of Scientology, which given the source material and the star would be an unavoidable topic. But then came Franchise Pictures, an independent company that funded the flick by "bundling" it with other movie properties that investors were more interested in. Travolta himself cut his then-standard $20 million salary in half and invested his own money in the project on the optimistic assumption that he would make it on the back end.

Which never happened. The movie was a critical and commercial bomb (it went on to sweep the "Razzies," the tongue-in-cheek awards for Hollywood's worst movies), Travolta's career momentum was squashed and Franchise Pictures was sued by its investors for fraud relating specifically to *Battlefield Earth*. (They eventually went bankrupt.) Travolta defends the movie, but then, he would. It's his baby. Which is the point—and why this is a vanity project.

Not every vanity project goes the way of failure. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, funded wholly out of his own pocket, grossed over $600 million worldwide. But for every *Passion*, there's a *Battlefield Earth* and a *Hudson Hawk*, and a *Heaven's Gate* and a *Razor's Edge* (and neck, to some extent, a *Star Trek V*)—a movie where one person who can't or won't be denied says, "Come on, this will be *great*," and everyone else realizes there's nothing else to be done but get through it.

So when your favorite actor or director starts saying their next project is "the film I've been trying to make for years," be prepared. But I will say this: When you watch *Battlefield Earth*, Travolta, at least, looks like he's having fun. Good for him. If only the rest of us could have shared in it.

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The *Star Trek* Movie Cheat Sheet

This week the 11th *Star Trek* movie hits theaters. And while this new chapter is meant to be a "reboot," you'd still need to know a bit about its predecessors to get the most out of the experience. But if you're dreading the thought of a 20 hour *Trek* movie marathon, fret not. Here's a cheat sheet (complete with Haiku!) to catch you up.

***Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979)**
Plot Haiku: Alien space cloud
Looks for its mommy but gets
Captain Kirk instead
The Background: Paramount had been kicking around the idea of making a new TV version of *Star Trek*, but went with a movie after *Star Wars* raked it in at the box office. They spent $35 million making the movie (equivalent to $100 million today) and grossed $82 million (about $230 million today).
The Fan Line: It's slow and boring and mostly exists to out special effect George Lucas.

***Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982)**
Plot Haiku: Kirk learns true meaning
Of Kobayashi Maru!
When Spock dies nobly
The Background: Paramount slashed the budget for this one and brought in Nicholas Meyer to direct. Leaner budget plus tighter script and more focus on characters equated box office only slightly less than the first flick — and set the production template for the series.
The Fan Line: Indisputably the best, with the best villain (Ricardo Montalbán's impressively chested Khan), best Kirk emotional outburst (*KHAAAAAAAAAAAN!*) and of course best death of a series character.

***Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984)**
Plot Haiku: Hey, Spock is alive!
Let's all steal the *Enterprise*
And go get him back!
The Background: The filmmakers wanted to bring Spock back from the dead, actor Leonard Nimoy agreed only if he were allowed to direct. This is the first movie where the series nemeses, the Klingons, are extensively used.
The Fan Line: It's not a bad time waster, and they do get Spock back.

***Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986)**
Plot Haiku: Crew goes back in time
For songs of the humpback whale
Or else Earth goes boom

The Background: Nimoy back again in the director's chair for the funniest and lightest chapter of the franchise. It's the only *Star Trek* movie (so far) to crack $100 million in its domestic theatrical run.
The Fan Line: The favorite after *Wrath of Khan* and the one that even those clueless in the ways of *Trek* can enjoy.

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier **(1989)**
Plot Haiku: It's a search for God
But there is no God in here
Just Shatner's ego
The Background: After Nimoy, William Shatner wanted a turn in the director's chair (and they gave it to him (he also co-wrote the story). This one made half of what *Trek IV* made, and is the least financially successful original series' flick.
The Fan Line: Lots of eyerolling and agreement to never speak of it again.

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country **(1991)**
Plot Haiku: The Klingons need help!
Can Kirk put aside his hate
To save the ridged ones?
The Background: Writer-director Nicholas Meyer returns to put a capstone on the original series' era of *Trek* and to dovetail the series into "Next Generation" movies.
The Fan Line: Does what it was intended to do and ends the Kirk era on a high note.

Star Trek: Generations **(1994)**
Plot Haiku: It's Kirk and Picard!
They get together, and not
In a fanfic way!
The Background: The first movie to feature the "Next Gen" cast also lets fans know what happened to Kirk after *Trek VI*. While he was always intended to die helping Picard save the universe, his death scenes were actually reshot to make them more heroic.
The Fan Line: It's not bad, but fans were hoping for something more.

Star Trek: First Contact **(1996)**
Plot Haiku: Those creepy Borg dudes
Try to mess with the time stream
Picard says: Uh, no
The Background: Picard's Number One, Jonathan Frakes, takes the director's chair. It's was the most financially successful of the "Next Gen" *Trek* movies at $92 million domestically and $146 mil. on worldwide, and also featured the (to date) largest opening weekend for the series: $30 million.
The Fan Line: Best "Next Gen" movie, hands down, in no small part to the Enterprise crew kicking all sorts of Borg butt.

***Star Trek: Insurrection* (1998)**
Plot Haiku: The fountain of youth
Defended by our *Trek* pals
Who, well, sag a bit
The Background: Frakes is back in the director's chair and there's not much *else* to say except that once it came out, both fans and filmmakers agreed that the franchise needed some shaking up.
The Fan Line: It's a perfectly cromulent *Trek* flick, and that's about it.

***Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002)**
Plot Haiku: Picard's nemesis
Turns out to be his clone
It's, like, confusing
The Background: Paramount recruited *Gladiator* screenwriter John Logan and director Stuart Baird to revive the series. It didn't work. The script was confusing and needlessly dark, and Baird makes a better editor (two Oscar nominations) than a director. The lifeless box office killed the series until now.
The Fan Line: The only real question is whether it's worse than *Trek V*.

And now you're caught up!

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Showing Sympathy for SciFi Screenwriters

I was talking movies with a friend recently—I know shocker—and he made an offhand comment which I found both deeply amusing and true. "You know, if I were spending millions on making a movie, I think I could afford to have the script make sense." The point was brought home to me, quite literally, last weekend when my wife picked up the DVD of *Push*, the recent science fiction flick in which attractive people with psychic powers run around Hong Kong for reasons that make absolutely no sense at all. Really, that's in the script. Someone actually tells the other characters they have to move about as if they don't know what they're going to do next. I could just see the screenwriter snickering his ass off when he wrote that, in terms of the movie making sense, he'd let himself off the hook. Nicely done, sir.

However, pushing aside *Push* for the moment to get back to my friend's observation, I have to say I have some sympathy for screenwriters at moments like that, particularly ones writing scifi. Writing a script with good, rigorous science fictional concepts while still being entertaining is hard enough, but then hoping that script makes it through the sausage grinder known as Hollywood intact—that's a little far-fetched.

Let's say you've written a gnarly scifi movie script and you've managed to sell the script to a movie producer. Congratulations! Treat yourself to a celebration at TGI Friday's. Because now it gets wacky.

The producer takes the project, including your script, to a movie studio. They like it, but they think the script needs work. Fortunately, they have a guy they like to use to tidy up scripts. Sometimes he's a script doctor, whose work will be uncredited, and sometimes he gets a screenplay credit. He fiddles with the script until the studio likes it.

There's a director attached. He loves the project, but there are a couple things about the script that don't quite work for him. He gets his own pet screenwriter to fiddle—or fiddles himself—until the screenplay is how he likes it. Then he and the studio have an argument about the new script, because now producing the screenplay as written will cost $20 million more in effects shots. Director leaves the project, new director comes on. New director has some script notes. Script gets re-written again. And everything's groovy.

Until the studio head gets fired. The new head comes in and starts killing off movies championed by her predecessor because, after all, if his choices were so good, why was he fired? The good news is your movie survives the ax. The bad news is, the new studio head wants to make it for a third less than the original approved budget. So: Another rewrite.

Meanwhile, your project lands an A-list star. A-list star loves the script but notices some really good lines are going to other characters, and also thinks his character needs to be more sympathetic. Maybe more of a backstory. And a love interest! And he's got a screenwriter friend he knows can nail it. So in comes another script doctor. Finally, after the efforts of many diverse hands—not a lot of

whom are particularly interested in the story—there's a shooting script. And if you think that script is going to make it through filming intact, well. Surprise!

Where is the original screenwriter in all of this? He might be involved all the way through. But more likely he's still at TGI Friday's, wondering what the hecks going on with the script. And when he gets to see the movie he wrote, he may find out that what's left of his original screenplay is a few scattered lines, a story credit and a shared screenplay credit.

If you think I'm exaggerating, check out "Building the Bomb," a classic essay by screenwriter Terry Rossio about the troubles adapting Robert Heinlein's novel *The Puppet Masters* to the big screen. The result? Well, *The Puppet Masters* isn't exactly at the top of anyone's movie list.

But it brings home an ironic twist to my friend's comment. A major reason so many scripts don't seem to make sense is not because movie makers can't afford to make them better, but because there's so much money involved that everyone who comes in needs to feel they're just fixing the millions they're spending. And often the easiest way to do that is to fiddle with a script. The miracle is that at the end of the day, any scripts make sense at all.

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Four Reasons Why *Avatar* Is Too Big to Fail

I was forwarded this *New York Times* article on James Cameron's sci-fi flick *Avatar* and how the production and marketing of the movie will likely cost a staggering half billion dollars. The friend who forwarded it to me wrote, "Is this film ever going to make its money back?" Sure it could and probably will.

Some of the answers are in the article itself. First, the half billion under discussion is not being fronted by a single studio (in this case 20th Century Fox) it's the entire outlay of cash which includes funds from two other movie companies that between them are covering 60 percent of the production costs. It also includes advertising deals where one company basically uses *Avatar* properties while promoting their own goods; the article notes Panasonic using *Avatar* clips as part of a $25 million effort to push its own home theater lines.

To be clear, Fox isn't getting off cheaply; when all is said and done it's going to be on the hook for at least a couple hundred million dollars in production and marketing costs. If the flick tanks it will hurt. But there's a difference between being on the hook for a half a billion, and being on the hook for half that.

Beyond that, there are other factors to consider.

First, there's a difference between 20th Century Fox spending a couple hundred million dollars (or so) on the production of *Avatar* and, say, Warner Bros. putting $100 million dollars into *The Adventures of Pluto Nash*. Honestly, I try to imagine the pitch for that one. "We have a great idea. First, it's a science fiction comedy. Second, the star hasn't been hot in a decade except when he wears a fat suit. Third, the director has never had a hit that didn't star Billy Crystal and a herd of cattle. It can't miss!"

Contrast this with the pitch one would make with *Avatar*: "It's the Oscar-winning director of the most successful movie in history returning to the genre that made him famous, using new technology to show moviegoers visuals they have never *ever* seen before. Plus it'll be in 3D, so we can charge more for the tickets." If I were a studio executive, I know which of these I'd go for.

The point here is that track record does matter. James Cameron will spend every single dollar a studio gives him, and more — but as far as being both a bringer of big box office and pushing the technical envelope, he's in a class which at this point includes only George Lucas, Peter Jackson and Steven Spielberg. More to the point, with the arguable exception of *The Abyss*, which I think even barely broke even, James Cameron has not lost money on a movie.

Another thing to consider: *Titanic* brought in two-thirds of its total gross from overseas markets. *True Lies*, Cameron's movie before *Titanic*, brought in 61 percent of its gross overseas. *Terminator 2*, 60 percent. Over the last twenty years, Cameron's movies have been instrumental in expanding the global market for Hollywood flicks and, for better or worse, making the U.S. film industry a factor in global tastes when making its product.

What this offers Fox is a hedge against a possible lackluster U.S. performance—frankly put, it's the global market that will be Cameron's primary box office, with the domestic box office the (probably large) cherry on top.

Finally, there's the matter of 3D. In the last couple of years, 3D screenings of movies have been a boost to the box office bottom line, but *Avatar* will be one of the first major studio live-action flicks in recent memory (if not *the* first) for which the 3D enabled theaters are going to be the movie's main revenue stream as opposed to a bonus. Since tickets for 3D theaters go for up to a 30 percent premium over standard tickets, that's likely to make a huge difference in the opening weekend numbers and help to keep the weekend-to-weekend fall-off manageable.

What could sink *Avatar*? For the opening weekend, I'd say almost nothing, even if the reviews are uniformly negative (which I don't expect), very little will stop a wide swath of science fiction and action fans from filling seats. Very bad word of mouth could kill second weekend and repeat viewing, but it really would have to be pretty bad.

In short, unless *Avatar* turns out to be *historically* awful—which given Cameron's track record is unlikely—it's a pretty safe bet that the movie is going to hit its marks financially. At which point a half billion-dollar price tag won't look like folly; it will simply look like the cost of doing business with James Cameron.

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Passing Judgment on the SciFi Cred of *Inglourious Basterds*

Warning: This column contains mild thematic spoilers for the movie *Inglourious Basterds*.

In the wake of my Oscar analysis column a couple of weeks ago (see page 143 Five Thoughts on This Years SciFi Oscar Nominations), Niall Harrison—an editor of the science fiction site Torque Control—asked me via Twitter the following, paraphrased because I can't find the specific tweet question:

> You mentioned *Avatar* and *District 9* as science fiction films nominated for Best Picture but isn't *Inglourious Basterds* science fiction as well?

This is a *fascinating* question, since without going into too much detail, it eventually becomes clear that *Inglourious Basterds* is taking place in a somewhat altered historical timeline (it's World War II all right, just not necessarily *our* World War II). Generally speaking, "alternate history" is regarded as a science fiction genre, which would make *Basterds* a scifi movie in some manner.

In one sense I would acknowledge that Niall has a cogent point. Hey, if you mess with the timeline, the geeks are going to come out of the woodwork and start chanting "One of us! One of us!" I wouldn't suggest that scifi fans shouldn't feel as if *Basterds* fits into their genre. Take it! Love it! And if it wins the Best Picture feel free to claim it as yours.

That said, here are a couple of reasons why *other* folks might not be so quick to see it as science fiction.

1. It wasn't marketed as science fiction: From a practical point of view, neither writer/director Quentin Tarantino nor The Weinstein Company made any attempt to play up its speculative elements, and indeed probably hoped to keep them under wraps until the last possible moment. *Basterds* was marketed primarily as first, a historical epic and second, a Quentin Tarantino movie—the director having enough of his own style to be a genre unto himself.

In fact, such is the reputation of Tarantino that when his movie does go off its historical rails I think most moviegoers think, "Well, that's just Quentin," rather than, "My God, Quentin's made a science fiction movie!" In *Kill Bill Vol. 2* for example, Tarantino has the character Bill develop an amazing truth serum, it doesn't mean *Kill Bill* becomes scifi because Bill is suddenly a mad scientist. Which brings us to my second point.

2. The science fictional aspects of the movie are not necessarily essential to it: To be sure, without the alternate history aspect it becomes a somewhat *different* movie in the end. But the fact is that the majority of the movie's themes, characters and narrative are developed without engaging in or resorting to the

alternate historical aspects, and nearly all of them could have survived without it—it's just the movie would have ended up a heroic tragedy. If the movie doesn't require science fictional elements to work, it's probably not really science fiction. Somewhat related to this, in a bit picky way:

3. It's kinda more like fantasy than scifi anyway: If the Inglourious Basterds came back in time to alter the flow of history, then it's definitely science fiction. If while tromping around the French countryside they came across a cache of advanced alien weapons that vaporized Nazis? Scifi again. But if everything in the movie is pretty much as it was during that historical era except for the point at which an alternate timeline begins—and then everything more or less proceeds technologically similarly after that point—then the alternate history isn't really science fictional. It's fantastical wish fulfillment. Which is still *cool*, mind you, and still speculative. Just not science fictional.

Finally, this point:

4. If *Inglourious Basterds* is science fiction, so are most historical movies: Most historical epics are about as alternate in their history as *Inglourious Basterds* is. For example, take *Gladiator*—the most recent historical epic to win the Best Picture Oscar. Turns out that Marcus Aurelius thought his son Commodus would make a fine emperor, since the two ruled jointly; that Commodus did not in fact smother his father to death, and that while Commodus was indeed eventually killed by an athlete, it was by a wrestler who strangled him in his bath, not a former general turned gladiator in the Coliseum. Oh, and Commodus's death didn't bring back the Republic. So, yeah, that's some pretty *alternate* history there. I won't even go into what a historical mess *Braveheart* is.

But neither of those movies is considered scifi, and neither should be *Inglourious Basterds*. The only difference is that Tarantino's messing with history we actually still remember.

—February 18, 2010 Next 67, Previous 257

SciFi Video Games That Could Make Good Movies, If They're Done Right

A reader writes:

> You're pretty negative on video games as source material for movies. But do you think any video games could make good movies?

Normally I would refer such questions to AMCtv.com's resident video game expert fellow columnist Anthony Burch. But what the heck. I don't think video games are inherently poor source material. Theoretically anything can be good material as long as the people involved are clever and know their way around what they hope to adapt.

When *Pirates of the Caribbean* was announced as a movie project, I thought someone was mad — but smart people took a theme-park ride and made it work because they didn't make a movie about the ride, they made a movie of the world the ride takes place in.

Here's some sci-fi games I would pay to see in a movie theater:

BioShock: Often described as Atlantis meets *Atlas Shrugged*, BioShock has a nifty premise, an engaging story, creepy moral quandaries and production design that's Oscar-worthy. Gamers see BioShock as the descendant of the equally creepy, brilliant System Shock games, which themselves would make good flicks.

Half-Life: Half-Life is one of the first video games I replayed just to go through its story once more—not a total surprise, as the narrative was crafted by Marc Laidlaw, an accomplished sci-fi novelist. Laidlaw took a standard "Oh, no. Scientists have opened a passage in space-time and evil aliens are on the other end" video-game trope and made it work like a shiny new idea. Half-Life's sequels have even better stories.

Halo: This one is obvious because it was inevitably going to be made into a movie with Peter Jackson producing and Neill Blomkamp directing. But then the project fell apart, and Jackson and Blomkamp went off and made *District 9*, which was recently nominated for Best Picture and Screenplay Oscars. These guys could have made a Halo flick worth watching. It doesn't hurt that the Halo series has a deep and consistent mythology of its own — or that there are several Halo novels worth raiding, for story points.

Homeworld: Homeworld has a great story, about people who discover that they aren't from what they thought was their home planet and build a huge spacecraft to find the real one. The game play consists largely of real-time strat-

egizing in order to fend off attacks from aliens. The goal for potential filmmakers wouldn't be to re-create the game, but to evoke the world of the game.

Portal: This game is made by Valve Software, the same people who made Half-Life, and likewise, has excellent writing, complementing compelling game play. Making a whole movie out of what is basically an escape-from-a-maze story would be a challenge, but the reason I'd see it is GLADOS, the best homicidal computer since HAL. She alone would be worth the price of admission.

You might notice that, aside from Halo, I've avoided military sci-fi video games. That's because I think awful movies like *Doom* have poisoned that well and only a franchise as strong as Halo could un-poison it. It's also because, well, after a certain amount of time, all military sci-fi shooters feel alike. The games I've mentioned are so distinct that I find myself wanting to see their worlds brought to the big screen.

—*February 25, 2010. Next: 145, Previous: 65*

Science Fiction's Ultimate Dream Team

So here's an interesting thought experiment: You have been given access to the government's top-secret time machine for the purpose of putting together the Best Science-Fiction Filmmaking Team of All Time. Whom do you choose? And why? Yes, these are the things I think about and not just because I write a column about science fiction film. Although that does mean I get to tell you about them. Here are my choices.

DIRECTOR: This one's the easy one. If you've going to pick just one science-fiction director, you go with **Steven Spielberg**. He can do action (*Jurassic Park*, *Minority Report*), he can do heart (*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*), and occasionally he can do weird (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Artificial Intelligence: AI*). He's had a science-fiction turkey or two (*The Lost World: Jurassic Park*), but his hit-miss ratio in science fiction is unmatched. Not picking him for your team would be like not picking Michael Jordan in his prime for your basketball team.

ALTERNATES: Ridley Scott, James Cameron

PRODUCER: George Lucas would seem like an obvious choice here, since the *Star Wars* films and the Indiana Jones films are all unqualified moneymakers, but outside those two franchises he's a little shaky (*Howard the Duck*, *Willow*), and inside those two franchises his influence on scripts and stories don't do the films any favors. So instead let me suggest a dark-horse candidate: **Gale Anne Hurd**, who produced some of the most significant science-fiction films of the eighties and nineties (notably *Aliens* and the first two *Terminator* films, directed by her former husband, James Cameron), and whose other films in the genre are either enjoyable (*Tremors*) or profitable (*Armageddon*). She knows her way around science fiction.

ALTERNATES: Frank Marshall, Kathleen Kennedy, George Pal

WRITERS: **Lawrence Kasdan** and **Leigh Brackett** worked on only one science-fiction movie together, but that movie just happened to be *The Empire Strikes Back*, the best written of the *Star Wars* films. Kasdan brought in emotional resonance, while Brackett, the co-screenwriter of Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo* and *Big Sleep*, brought in snap and a tough-edged sensibility. Between them they could handle whatever story you needed.

ALTERNATES: David Koepp, David Webb Peoples

MUSIC: Dude. **John Williams**. When you consider that more than half of the movie music that people can hum from memory comes from him, this isn't even close. Five Oscar wins and over 40 nominations also make for a strong case.

ALTERNATES: Jerry Goldsmith, Danny Elfman

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Science-fiction film has been perennially strong in this category with nominations coming in from the thirties on and several wins including Vilmos Zsigmond in 1977 for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and Mauro Fiore for *Avatar* just last year. My A team selection for this category however, is **Allen Daviau**, who gave *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* its distinctive look and was nominated for an Oscar for it) and who looked through the camera for several other Spielberg and or science fiction films. He's an essential part of the equation when people think of the Spielberg look.

ALTERNATES: Geoffrey Unsworth, Jordan Cronenweth

SPECIAL EFFECTS: In this field it would be easy to pick someone from the *Star Wars* or CGI eras of effects but this is one field where I personally would go old school and pick stop-motion effects master **Ray Harryhausen**, who made special effects amazingly largely during a time when the advanced processes we take for granted today weren't available. From 1953's *Beast From 20000 Fathoms* to 1981's *Clash of the Titans* he did spectacular work. One can only imagine what he would have done with the technology he'd have had access to today.

ALTERNATES: John Dykstra, Phil Tippett

MAKEUP: **Rick Baker** won the very first non-honorary Oscar for Best Makeup, in 1982 for *An American Werewolf in London*, and picked up five more since, including ones for *Harry and the Hendersons*, *Ed Wood*, *The Nutty Professor* and *Men in Black*. Makeup for *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*? His baby. Another easy choice (although there are Stan Winston partisans out there).

ALTERNATES: John Chambers, Stan Winston

And you ask: What about actors and actresses? I'm saving them for another column on another day. Till then!

—October 6, 2010 *Next 71, Previous 349*

Harry Potter and the Amazing Disappearing 3D

You might not have noticed it, but an important thing in movies happened last week. Warner Brothers, the studio that releases the Harry Potter films, announced that *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, which was slated to be converted into 3-D, would instead be released, unmolested, in regular old 2-D format. The studio's official explanation is this:

> Despite everyone's best efforts, we were unable to convert the film in its entirety and meet the highest standards of quality. We do not want to disappoint fans who have long anticipated the conclusion of this extraordinary journey.

Leaving aside the corporate spin, this choice doesn't appear to make much economic sense. If the conversion process was in full swing, Warner Brothers sank several million dollars into 3-D-ing the movie. It also means that the studio has to forgo the presumed boost at the box office that 3-D brings. And it means that in not securing those 3-D theaters for Potter, Warner Brothers frees them up for competing films, most likely DreamWorks's *Megamind* and Disney's *Tangled* and *TRON: Legacy*. Why would Warner Brothers choose to lose money it's already spent and leave money on the table for its competitors?

Let's break this down a bit, shall we?

1. This Harry Potter film wasn't shot in 3-D, so the 3-D process is generated by computers after the fact. At this point in time the public has seen enough hastily done 3-D conversions to know that they don't like them; see Warner's own previously noted *Clash of the Titans*, which despite its commercial success started the grumbling about late-breaking 3-D conversions. See also Paramount's *Last Airbender*, roundly criticized for crappy 3-D.

2. If this Harry Potter film is like the ones preceding it, and judging from the trailer there's no reason to believe it won't be, then it's going to be mostly dark and moody. Which means it's a bad candidate for the 3-D process, which dims the screen for the viewer and turns dark action into a murky mess. The moviemakers hastily converting their films into 3-D didn't seem to pick up on the fact that when James Cameron made *Avatar* he made it bright; even the night scenes are lit up fluorescently (something that *TRON: Legacy*, incidentally, should have no problem with). Filmgoers have picked up on the dark crappy 3-D bit, especially when added to computer conversions.

3. Because of *Clash*, *Airbender*, and other underwhelming 3-D events (*Piranha* in 3-D, anyone? How about *Step Up 3D*?), the bloom is definitely off the three-dimensional rose. When I went to go see the 3-D version of *Despicable Me*-

which was a fine bright 3-D ready film—what I mostly heard in the theater was complaining that the film was only showing in 3-D, a lot of folks in the audience would have happily forgone the 3-D for a cheaper ticket and less of a chance for a headache afterward. At the moment, I can think of only one film that people are genuinely excited about for a 3-D experience—the aforementioned *TRON: Legacy*—and everything else is take it or leave it as far as 3-D goes.

4. Harry Potter fans are very protective of their boy, and if Warner Brothers screws up the final films in the series they may burn down the entire city of Burbank in retaliation. This is not nearly the exaggeration you may think it is.

Now add this all up and ask yourself this: is Warner Brothers actually going to hurt itself by not putting out the latest Potter in 3-D? I don't think it is. The sort of person who is going to go to a Harry Potter film is also the sort of person who knows enough about the 3-D process at this point to actively avoid what is likely to be a crappy iteration. It's likely that core Potter fans were planning on catching the 2-D version anyway, with 3-D a grudging alternative if no other option were available. What I'm saying is that it's entirely possible that Harry Potter might have a smaller overall gross with 3-D than without it.

Now bear in mind we're talking about the difference between a huge pot of money and a slightly smaller huge pot of money; the least successful Potter film made $250 million domestically. Be that as it may, movie companies like making money, and somewhere in Burbank some accountant undoubtedly crunched the numbers.

What will be interesting will be what happens from here. The final Potter movie next year is still scheduled for 3-D conversion. But if the current Potter film does perfectly fine—and it will—I suspect that the final Potter might end up with something like selected scenes in Imax 3-D or be released in relatively few 3-D theaters for actual fans of the form.

Personally, I'd be okay with this scenario. More 2-D for me.

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The Art of Storytelling

Why the Movie Version of Your Favorite SciFi Book Stinks, Part I

I spent last weekend at the Oasis 21 science fiction convention in Orlando and had a wonderful time speaking on panels and chatting with the various convention goers. During a little bit of downtime between panels I talked to one attendee about science fiction books that had been made into movies. After recounting one particularly (in her opinion) bad book to film translation she looked at me and asked "Why does Hollywood do such a bad job turning science fiction books into movies?"

To which I said "Because it doesn't *matter* if they do a bad job or not."

Now this wasn't the answer she wanted and I can sympathize. But the fact is if you're hoping that a movie made from an SF book will be much like it particularly a major studio movie you will almost always be disappointed. Here are three reasons why. Note: These are not the *only* three reasons just the ones we'll look at today.

1. Ninety percent of the text (or more) is going out the window.

When *Jurassic Park* came out in '93 I interviewed author Michael Crichton and he said something that's on point here. It was (and I'm paraphrasing because it was 15 years ago): "Look when you have a novel, it's 400 pages long. When you have a script it's the equivalent of 40 of those pages. No matter what you're going to lose a lot." Bear in mind he was saying this about *Jurassic Park* which, as books go, was about as movie-ready as they come. When you're talking about books that aren't intentionally written with one eye toward the screenplay adaptation, the challenge is even greater.

Now Crichton's hand was on the scale a bit since much of what takes a lot of words to describe—action scenes, scenery, character emotional responses and so on—can be shown visually with great economy. The old "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words" phenomenon. But at the end of the day he's correct. A lot gets thrown out including subplots, asides, character development moments and often the screenwriter is careless key moments that fans of the book will miss and howl over.

2. The definition of "hit" is vastly different for books than films

A science fiction or fantasy book that sells 100,000 copies these days is a big hit. A major science fiction or fantasy movie that had 100,000 theater admissions even just on opening weekend, would be a miserable failure that would be the equivalent of a $700,000 box office gross. Now to keep harping on poor *Speed Racer* (see page 175), $20 Million Now, $20 Million Then. How *Star Wars* Changed Movie Math, but as $18.5 million opening weekend means about 2.64 million people actually shelled out $7 to see it ($7 being roughly the same cost as a paperback book). If one of my books sold 2.64 million copies *ever* forget just in its opening week, publishers would drag themselves across

iodine-saturated glass shards to have me be in their book lines. And I, for one, would love to see that.

The reason the definitions of success are different are pretty simple. The number of people required to produce and distribute a book, and the cost of production and distribution therein, is several orders of magnitude smaller than either number of people required to produce and distribute major films, or the cost to do so. This means that books can afford not to take into consideration the lowest common audience member. Whereas if you're making a film—especially one with lots of expensive effects, as science fiction films so often have—you have to try to get as many people as possible into the theater from the word *go*. What that means for your favorite book is that all the parts that really speak to a core fandom are likely (to mix metaphors here) to get flattened out and homogenized and made as blandly acceptable as possible. Because, ultimately, millions and millions of dollars are on the line. Art and textual fidelity are *nice*, but having big fat hits that spawn sequels and keep Hollywood afloat are nicer from the film company point of view.

3. Textual fidelity doesn't have much of a track record in science fiction film.

Here, courtesy of Box Office Mojo, is a list of the most successful science fiction films based on books since 1980 (fantasy is not represented). What do we learn? First, we learn it helps to have Steven Spielberg direct, since he's in the top three spots. Second, we learn that fidelity to the book text has almost *no* correlation to the success of the film. *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World* are somewhat related to their books, but *War of the Worlds* is a largely complete reimagining, and if you want to see science fiction literature fans get truly, truly angry, ask them their opinions about the adaptations of *I, Robot* and *Starship Troopers* (remember to hold up a tarp to shield yourself from the spittle).

Basically, you can make the argument to the film studio that it matters if the film is even vaguely related to the book, because the ultimate argument that messing with the story messes with the box office—isn't there. Perhaps as *art* it might make a difference, but on that score it's worth remembering that since 1980 the most artistically influential SF film adapted from a book was *Blade Runner*, which is in fact not very much like its source material, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, at all—and which was a bit of a financial failure when it first came out.

What do we learn? That when a book and film share the same title, it doesn't mean they share much of anything else. Nor is that really likely to change.

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Science Fiction Is Easy, Comedy Is Hard

I took my daughter to go see *Wall E* last weekend and as just about every critic in the world has noted it's an absolutely delightful film. There's apparently already a whisper campaign to get it nominated for Best Picture, which if it were to succeed would make *Wall E* both one of the very few animated films and one of the very few science fiction films to get such a nod. Which would make it a pretty rare film, indeed.

But in one sense it's already a very rare film. It's one of the few science fiction films that is primarily a comedy. Furthermore, it's one of the few science fiction films that's primarily a comedy that is *actually* funny. Science fiction, taken as a whole, is not a notably funny film genre (at least not intentionally). I've spent a little bit of time trying to figure out why.

Now before anyone starts listing them off in the comments, yes there *are* some funny science fiction films, and here are some of them: *Back to the Future*, *Men in Black*, *Spaceballs*, *Sleeper*, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *Galaxy Quest*. What do these films have in common? First, they break into two wide and overlapping categories: Time travel (*Back to the Future*, *Sleeper*) and farce (*Spaceballs*, *Hitchhiker's Guide*).

In both those cases, the comedy happens because the film knows it's being watched—that's the humor comes out of the fact that the folks who made the film are relying on the audience to get all the in-jokes. *Spaceballs* only works if you've soaked yourself in *Star Wars*. *Galaxy Quest* likewise needs an at least passing acquaintance with *Star Trek*. In both cases, it was a safe bet for the filmmakers—who doesn't know about *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*?—although on the off chance you spent the last 40 years in a cave, if you were to see either film you'd be wondering what was so funny. Even *Men in Black* trades off a cultural construct (dude, the government's been hiding aliens! For *years*, man!).

Likewise, time travel is all about the audience seeing the humor in someone from one time period dealing with another, whether it's someone from the past defrosted in the future (*Sleeper*) or someone from the future meeting the squares from the past (*Back to the Future*). It's fun to watch Marty McFly struggle with a pop bottle or a 1973 Woody Allen living in a world with Orgasmatrons, but it's dependent on the audience knowing from their own experience why these things are funny.

In short, in science fiction films, humor basically happens with a wink and a nod to the audience. Which is fine. Like all of these films. But are there science fiction comedies that don't get their laughs this way? And if there are, are they actually any good? My problem is that when I think of science fiction comedies that get their laughs specifically out of the characters and science fictional elements of the story, I can't think of many that are actually good. Examples in this vein category include the terrifying Eddie Murphy science fictional trilogy of the *Nutty Professor* films and *The Adventures of Pluto Nash*. I shudder to think about the upcoming *Meet Dave*, the played-for-laughs remake of *The*

Stepford Wives the steampunk misadventure known as *Wild Wild West*, and the occasional mawkish robot movie *Short Circuit Bicentennial Man*. There are a few cult movies one can toss in here for discussion—*Buckaroo Banzai*, for example which I personally love but which many people loathe with a passion—but when it comes down to it when a science fiction comedy doesn't lean on farce or an audience indulgence of cultural in-jokes it tends to fall down.

Which is what makes *WALL-E* even more impressive as a science fiction comedy. Certainly the film gets in its share of cultural references and then some from Rubik's Cubes to Mac start-up sounds. But those are asides to the real humor in the story, which comes first from the pure physical comedy of the *WALL-E* character (ironic, since he exists only virtually) and then from the downtown boy-uptown girl romantic mismatch between WALL-E and Eve the film's other primary robot character. The fact that both these elements play out and depend on the film's science fictional setting without requiring a wink to the audience means at least for me anyway that I can lose myself in the movie, rather than getting a constant reminder from the filmmakers that hey you're watching a movie and gee, aren't we clever? Yes, clever is nice. It's even nicer when it happens without you noticing.

Now my question to you all: Am I being unduly harsh on science fiction comedies? Are there some examples that I'm missing that will totally invalidate my theories here? I'm relying on you to tell me.

—July 3, 2008 *Next 5, Previous 3*

Science and History: Everything the Movies Tell You Is Wrong

I've got another one of my questions for you: What do science fiction films and historical films have in common?

What they *don't* have in common is obvious. Timeframe. One genre almost always takes place in the future, or at least involves technology that is futuristic; the other, by definition, takes place in the past. There's generally very little overlap between the two there. 'Yeah, but what about alternate history movies? And time-travel movies?' Quiet, friend, you're bothering me.)

What about directors? You say. And actually, that's an *excellent* guess. Robert Zemeckis directed both *Forrest Gump* (which is history *esque* at least) and *Contact*. George Lucas's success with *American Graffiti* afforded him the chance to make *Star Wars*, Ridley Scott essayed cities past and future with *Gladiator* and *Blade Runner*, and Steven Spielberg directed both *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List* in the same year. There's an immense amount of overlap there. There's also an immense amount of overlap in motion picture technical fields as well—the amount of special effects and CGI work that goes into a historical epic these days is no less impressive than what you'll see in science fiction or fantasy films.

But that's not what I'm after. The primary thing that science fiction and historical movies have in common is that when it comes to the genre's respective real-world subjects of science and history, neither film genre actually strives for accuracy. Rather, what they strive for is *plausibility*—something that is good enough to get past the audience, for the purposes of the film.

As an example of this in the historical world, let's take Mel Gibson's Oscar-winning 1995 film *Braveheart*, in which Gibson plays Scottish historical hero William Wallace. Here's just some of what the film gets wrong:

1. The important Battle of Stirling Bridge takes place on a plain, minus the bridge.

2. William Wallace is seen being with (in several senses of the term) the English Princess Isabella, but the real-world Wallace died three years before Princess Isabella was married to Edward II, and she didn't even go to England until after she was married. So the two did not meet, much less get it on.

3. Kilts and blue face paint? Both anachronistic, albeit in different directions (kilts came later; blue face paint before).

And so on.

Are audiences appalled at this lack of historical accuracy? Not in the least. Tell the average moviegoer that 700 years ago Mel Gibson painted his face blue, put on a kilt and kicked English ass so hard that the future Queen of England couldn't help but be beguiled, and he'll say 'sounds about right' and grab some popcorn. It's not that average moviegoers are *stupid*, but that they're not heavily invested in factual accuracy (there's a difference), and what they *really* want is

to have a cool movie-going experience for their seven dollars. If the filmmakers fudge the facts along the way, well, *eh*. It's Hollywood.

That's *Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, *Pearl Harbor*, *300* and other "historical" films which send actual historians into a bit of a tizzy. Occasionally one gets its history more right than not (*Schindler's List*), but generally speaking, when filmmakers have to choose drama or fact, they'll go with drama. And as long as William Wallace doesn't whip out an Uzi and slay both King Arthur *and* Henry V, the audience will buy it.

Science fiction films work the same way. The goal is not to be accurate in the portrayal of science, but merely to be accurate *enough* so that the average moviegoer—the one who isn't, in fact, a physicist or biologist or astronomer or whatever—doesn't get distracted from their enjoyment of their film. Indeed, one can argue that stricter adherence to scientific accuracy could pull audiences out of their reverie. In space, there's no air to transmit sound, so explosions in space are silent. But show a frantic space battle without sound, and most audiences aren't going to thrill to the scientific accuracy; they're going to groan because in the most exciting part of the movie, *the sound went out*. It is possible to portray science more or less accurately in science fiction. *Contact* and *2001* are two movies that do it up to a point (and notably both are based on the work of scientists, Carl Sagan and Arthur C. Clarke, respectively). But again, when fact goes up against drama, fact is usually going to lose.

A cynic will note that the film industry is essentially banking on the ignorance of its audience in order to handwave over difficult facts, and the cynic will be absolutely right. It would also be correct that if we educated our people better, in both science and history, films wouldn't be able to let their facts slide nearly as much.

But it's worth noting that fact has never been an impediment to a story teller—ask Homer or Shakespeare about this—and in the case of science fiction, there's a big fat excuse inherent in its very name. One half of the phrase "science fiction" is the word "science," but the other other half of the phrase is "fiction." Speaking as someone who writes science fiction, I'm pretty solidly of the opinion that the "fiction" part has equal weight. So I think the "plausibility" guideline is not a *bad* one when it comes to science fiction, even as I wish and hope that dividing line for "plausible" for most movie goers gets a little more stringent over time. That's not too much to hope for in the long run.

But in the meantime remember: If you're getting what you know of history or science from Hollywood, you're doing it wrong. So. *Very* Wrong.

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Sports of the Future Will Be Much More Violent Than Those at the Olympics

If you're like most Americans (heck, like most humans with the ability to watch television or access the Internet), then at least some part of your time in the last week has been spent obsessively poring over the results from the Olympics, the competition of athletic skill that has its roots in classical Greece and which in its current form has been going on for over a century. (Me, personally? I've been busy with other things. I'm playing catch up at the moment.)

The occasion of the Olympics, however, has put me in a mind to consider the plight of sports in science fiction movies. It's perhaps not entirely surprising that sports do not play a huge role in the history of science fiction film, as comedy has quite a passel (like *Bad Dudes*, or *The Longest Yard*), and dramas have everything from *Pride of the Yankees* to *Million Dollar Baby*. But in science fiction, once you get past *Rollerball*, *The Running Man*, and this year's *Speed Racer* (see page 175: $20 Million Now, $20 Million Then: How *Star Wars* Changed Movie Math), SF movies with an explicit sport-oriented theme get thin on the ground. You have to look toward B movies (*The Blood of Heroes* would be a favorite of mine here), or consider films that have a sports sub-element, like *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* or *Tron*.

Why aren't sports represented in science fiction film? I suspect several reasons. First is simply that real sports are generally not science fictional enough, while one can certainly imagine people playing baseball or basketball a hundred years from now, the sport *itself* is not likely to be changed in a massively science fictional fashion. Therefore, why bother making a movie about the 2108 World Series or the 2208 Super Bowl? From a film producer's point of view, all that science fiction will just be a distraction. The second reason (and somewhat more shaky logically speaking) is that the core audience for science fiction, whether film or otherwise, is not precisely the group most fascinated with athletic events.

Be that as it may, there are enough science fiction films out there with a sports element to make a few general observations about how the subject is treated in the genre. Here's what I've noticed:

1. Science fiction sports films are dystopic. A common theme in science fiction sports films is that the sports are used by the autocratic government to distract the masses from the fact the world stinks and is falling down around them, a sort of "bread and circuses" tactic without a whole lot of bread. This is most explicit in *Rollerball*, where the popularity of Rollerball athlete Johnny E threatens the corporations who rule the world, and in *The Running Man*, where things have gotten so bad that you can see minor characters lusting after the crumbs of food that Running Man emcee Damon K. (Richards) leaves behind. The fact that science fiction movies see sports as an opiate of the people—something to distract them rather than ennoble them, as other genres do—speaks volumes about the science fiction mindset.

2. Science fiction sports are unspeakably violent and as often as not, end in death: Once again, *Rollerball* takes the cake here, as the sport starts off incredibly violent and gets worse as the film goes along, the corporations controlling the game start shaving off rules and limits to get to Johnny E. Death is the least horrible thing that happens to some of the players. In my favorite science fiction sports B-movie *The Blood of Heroes*, the players go after each other with spears and knives, and if you lose an eye while playing well that's quite all right. And *Tron*, another candidate for dystopia albeit in your computer, pits computer programs against each other with killer frisbees and the much lusted after bygeeks lightcycles, and to lose results in "derezzing," which in this case is just fake computerese for "death."

Tron's vaguely gladiatorial bent is something a number of other science fiction films share, dystopic films in particular enjoy having two or more players beat the crap out of each other — see *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* for the canonical example of this. The number of geeks who can chant "Two men enter. One man leaves!" without much prompting is truly terrifying to consider.

3. There's usually something significant riding on the outcome: We're not talking about winning the World Series or the World Cup here, we're talking something independent of the game itself. In *The Phantom Menace*, Jedi master Qui-Gon Jinn was betting on Anakin's freedom; in the *Running Man* the world was prepped for a proletarian revolution pending the outcome of the game, and in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, Max was engaging in a little bit of score setting between warring powers in exchange for his freedom. To this extent the sport these folks are engaging in is immaterial; the only thing that matters is simply that there is a winner.

What do we learn from the portrayal of sports in science fiction? Well, that sports are a method of control; that our descendants will love blood as much as the Romans did, and that after every game something momentous will happen that has nothing to do with what's going on down on the playing field. It's not a particularly encouraging picture, is it? On the whole I prefer the Olympics.

—August 14, 2008 *Next 305, Previous 115*

Why Tim Burton's Recurring *Nightmare* Remains So Popular

From time to time I find myself in the company of emo boys and goth girls, as one so frequently does these days. And while these sensitive purveyors of darkness may look down on me for my summery color schemes, lack of full-sleeve tattoos and/or cornea piercings, and the fact that I own the most recent Journey album — and *enjoy* it — I have something that puts them all into kohl-lined awe.

And that is: In the summer of 1993, when I was working as a film critic in California, I visited the studio in San Francisco where Tim Burton and Henry Selick were filming *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I toured the sets (which meant admiring miniatures from above while not touching anything, lest one messed up hours of animation), coming within inches all the parts of Halloweentown that the emos and goths wished they lived in.

Later, I and other critics were herded into a room for an interview with Burton, Selick and *Nightmare* composer Danny Elfman, who was also the singing voice for Jack, the skeletal ruler of Halloweentown. As part of that interview, we saw a rough cut of the section that would become the song "Jack's Lament." The animation was done, and so was the music, but the vocal track for Jack hadn't been laid down yet. So Elfman got up and sang the song live. Perfectly.

Now, as an old-school fan of Elfman and his '80s band Oingo Boingo, this was thrill enough for me. But when I recount it for the gothers, their eyes get all wide, and then the envy comes. Bitter, black-clad envy that eats at their souls like a wee hungry gargoyle.

Why Nightmare Persists: But while taunting emos and goths is fun, it also points out something about *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. A decade and a half after its 1993 release, this strange little musical is more popular than it was when it was released, a fact evidenced by annual re-issues in theaters at Halloween and by yet another DVD edition of the movie released this past Tuesday (the fourth home edition of the film, which also has at least two versions of the soundtrack available on CD and MP3). *Nightmare* hasn't managed to eclipse the other Disney musical of 1993, that would be *The Lion King*, but it has significantly more social currency among teens, twenty-somethings and even more than a few thirty-somethings, especially the ones who were, are, or want to be, just a little alienated from the mainstream.

Why this film? What's the secret to the long-running afterlife of this Disney animated musical? There are a number of reasons, but my theory is actually a simple one:

It's not really a Disney animated musical.

In one sense, this is quite literally inaccurate, as it was released by Disney. But in another sense, it's also quite literally *accurate*, since the film was originally released by Disney under the Touchstone Pictures banner (i.e., Disney's banner

for adult-themed movies) when Disney's then-head Michael Eisner decided that the film was too dark to be released under the Walt Disney Pictures banner, the usual home of Disney's animation work. (This makes one wonder if Eisner actually saw, say, *Pinocchio*, which was darker in a number of ways than *Nightmare* ever was.)

In the context of 1993, Eisner was entirely right. *Nightmare* is the odd stepchild of its time. The Disney films of this era—*Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*—are all of a piece: Smoothly and gorgeously animated stories of a young person finding him/herself, with color schemes that used all the crayons in the box, and music by way of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, thanks to Broadway vets Howard Ashman, Alan Menken, Tim Rice and pop star Elton John.

The Anti-Disney Musical—Or Is It? *Nightmare* on the other hand, was none of these things. Instead of a plucky teen, you have a weary and indisputably adult character who, aside from being dead, is jammed to the marrow with existential ennui, and whose gaunt, skeletal form wasn't cute in any conventional sense. The film's palette and themes were either washed-out blacks, oranges and greens or over-excited neons. The film's stop-motion technique—incredibly, this was the first full-length theatrical release to use it—gave it a twitchy, restless feel. And where Disney's musicals took from the sunny side of Broadway, Danny Elfman borrowed from darker and more cinematic lyricists and composers, most notably Bernard Herrmann and Weill-Brecht, and mixed it in with his own offbeat theatrical history and musical predilections. In many ways, *Nightmare* is the anti-Disney animated musical.

We have to be careful not to overstate things, the film was still meant for family audiences, even if it does feature Santa Claus being kidnapped and tortured—and the images, themes and music were darker and more sophisticated than, say, anything you might find in *Aladdin*, are still accessible, poppy and fun. (This is Halloween—but Halloween is the second largest commercial holiday in the calendar right after Christmas.) *Nightmare* is the anti-Disney animated musical—but it can and has been marketed just as effectively, those musicals are, and by the same people.

And in fact, this is the secret to its success. Tim Burton, Henry Selick and Danny Elfman took Disney money and crafted something that looks and feels like it's outside of the mainstream, even as it plays to it. A pseudo-secret document for the freaks and geeks who took to it with love and affection, and don't have to outgrow it because it's built to appeal to the alienated of all ages. That so many freaks and geeks (and yes, others) love it that Disney can wrench continued profits out of it through continual home video and theatrical re-releasing suggests that freaks, geeks, emos and goths are, in fact, solidly part of the mainstream now. Now, *there's* a thought.

If this disturbs them, and they want to get back out of the current mainstream, well, I suppose I can let them borrow my Journey album.

—August 28, 2008 Next 179, Previous 305

Why We Love Our Post-Apocalyptic Flicks

Before I begin this week's column, I'd like to mention something which I don't think I've mentioned before, which is: Hey, kids, I take requests! If there's something you'd like me to address here on AMC involving science fiction and fantasy movies, why not shoot me an e-mail at [redacted] asking me about it? I'm always happy to take suggestions from the audience, since it means a) it's a topic I know at least one of you is interested in, and b) it means I don't have come up with a topic on my own. Everybody wins.

The reason I mention this today is that in fact, I have a request, from Liz R, who writes:

> My sweetie and I decided to have a Mad Max marathon over the weekend, and while we were watching got into a conversation about post-apocalyptic science fiction, and why it seems so popular in film. We both had different theories and wondered if you had any thoughts on the matter.

Why yes, Liz, indeed I do. Post apocalyptic science fiction film has been popular for decades, going back at the very least to 1959's *On the Beach*, a somewhat high-minded film about the last bit of humanity awaiting nuclear war fallout in Australia, through the Mad Max films and up until last Christmas's *I Am Legend* remake and this year's upcoming adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The end of the world never goes out of style, at least as far as film is concerned. And why is this?

1. Because it's cheap and easy drama: Since I wrote a military science fiction novel, I often sit on panels where I'm asked what makes war so interesting to write about. It's simple: War is a convenient crucible for human character and thus, for drama. Lots of stuff is going on, almost all of it stressful and all of it dangerous, so you have an extreme circumstance in which to show off your character's personality.

The post apocalyptic setting is very much the same sort of thing. People in these movies are almost always at loose ends one way or another, and in a savage setting that closely resembles war—watch *The Road Warrior* or *I Am Legend* for confirmation of that—and the main character is almost being tested in some way. The extremity of situation makes it exciting and gives you sympathy for the character—if you don't sympathize with Will Smith's lonely predicament in *I Am Legend*, there's something a little wrong with you.

Also—and here's where the *Mad Max* angle comes in—it makes it easy to get away with a lot of action you would have to explain away in something approximating the real world. Mad Max isn't going to be Mad Max in a normal world, or even in one approximating it—note how long it takes in the very

first film, in which civilization is still hanging on by its fingernails, for Max to really get mad. But the automotive rage in *The Road Warrior*? Just another post-apocalyptic day at the office, folks.

2. Because they speak to our fears: Every generation of filmgoer gets the post-apocalyptic world they fear the most. In the '70s and particularly the '80s, the apocalypse that fueled our fears was nuclear: we dropped the bomb and now everything's gone to hell. *Waterworld* (which was more financially successful than people remember) addressed the idea of an ecological apocalypse—badly, yes, but even so.

These days, our apocalypses seem to be more biologically oriented than anything else. See *28 Days Later* or *Doomsday* or *I Am Legend*, in which viruses and plagues wipe us off the face of the earth. In both cases, filmmakers are setting audiences engage in a little bit of play-acting, which is to say, getting a little of the experience of what it would be like to live in a world where the missiles flew, or disease killed off everyone we knew. Whether these imagined futures are at all accurate is of course beside the point; they almost certainly aren't, any more than action films are an accurate portrayal of day-to-day life right now; they're still visceral run-throughs for moviegoers.

3. Because happy futures are boring: Seriously, the future in which humanity survives and lives happily ever after? Nice to live in, but would you want to watch it for two hours? It's not for nothing that in the best example of a happily ever after science fiction scenario we have—*Star Trek* and its largely peaceful United Federation of Planets—we spend most of our time on the fringes of the universe, in spaceships that are exploring "strange new worlds"—that is, places that the happily ever after hasn't gotten to yet. You probably wouldn't want to live in the future of *Mad Max* or *Waterworld* or *I Am Legend*, but watching them for a couple of hours, popcorn in hand and the apocalypse safely on the other side of the screen? That's *entertainment*, my friends. Better them than us.

I hope that answers your question, Liz.

—September 11, 2008 *Next 211, Previous 179*

The Battle Between Science and Religion—And SciFi Is the Battleground

This last weekend I was the Guest of Honor at LosCon, Southern California's regional science fiction convention. Between being fed in-N-Out Double-Doubles on the hour and sharing the stage with *Star Trek* star-turned Uber Geek Wil Wheaton (we explained what happened when I commissioned a black velvet painting of him as Wesley Crusher), I had an almost unspeakable amount of fun. I also participated in a thought-provoking panel discussion on religion and science fiction, in which we asked the question "How well represented is religion in science fiction?" and "how is religion represented in the future?"

It's an interesting topic because in our common culture, science and religion often take antagonistic roles towards each other—just pair off a creationist and someone versed in evolutionary biology, let them go five rounds, and you'll get the typical view. But as with everything, the reality is not so clear-cut. Polls regularly show that the majority of scientists practice a religion of some sort, while no less than the Roman Catholic Church accepts the idea of biological evolution. Since science and religion co-exist in the real world, how do they exist in the worlds of science fiction movies? The answer (or *my* answer, anyway) is that it's a mixed bag. Though benevolent spirituality occurs fairly frequently in the future, organized religions are often used as stock antagonists.

In the spirituality camp, we have the obvious example of *Star Wars*, in which George Lucas's nodding acquaintance with Eastern religions was distilled into the idea of "The Force," a mystical energy field binding everything in the galaxy and, coincidentally, bestowing those with training (notably the quasi-priestly warriors known as Jedi Knights) the ability to levitate heavy objects and deflect laser beams. Another fine example of this is the original 1951 version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in which Klaatu, the alien come to warn us to clean up our act, is very much an Aegis-and-Cherubim figure. He goes by the name of "Carpenter" while on Earth, then comes back to life after taking a bullet. Interestingly, *Day* director Robert Wise maintained he wasn't aware of such a legorical allegory in his film until it was pointed out to him much later; it makes you wonder if he had the same shooting script as everyone else.

In both *Star Wars* and *Day*, spirituality gets a largely positive spin (more so in *Star Wars* fans I'm actively ignoring the abominations that are Midichlorians and Anakin Skywalker's virgin birth, which are more about bad screenwriting than anything else), but when organized religion gets on camera, things get darker. *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, turns the U.S. into a dystopic fundamentalist dictatorship. Dehumanizing, no love there. Another take, *Escape from L.A.*, in which Snake Plissken reluctantly takes orders from a U.S. president who's moved the capital to Lynchburg, Virginia, home to Jerry Falwell's conservative Christian Liberty University (if you don't get the joke). Again, not too positive. And as a final example, I give you *The Chronicles of Riddick* (see page 5). The Riddick-ousness of *Riddick* (or, How Not to Make a SciFi Sequel), which features

an entire culture of death-loving zealots converting civilizations at the point of a sword (at least until Vin Diesel shows up). The Underworld cult of *Ridarck* isn't real, of course, but a religion doesn't have to be in order to make itself and its followers convenient science fiction bad guys.

Are there movies in which science and religion (as opposed to spirituality) co-exist (not always peacefully, then at least without overt hostility)? I can think of one off the top my head: *Contact*, based on Carl Sagan's only science fiction novel. In the movie, Jodie Foster's atheist astronomer and Matthew McConaghey's God-centered maverick preacher trade deep thoughts about the nature of the universe (as well as deep, moony gazes into each other's eyes). Neither converts the other—I hope that's not a spoiler for you—but what they do find is that while their views of the universe and God's place in it are not the same, they can still respect each other as seekers of truth. That's a nice spin on things, if you ask me, which is why *Contact* is still one of my favorite science fiction movies. Of course, this gets me eye rolls from people who are either committed atheists or fundamentalists, but you know what? I can live with being called a squishy centrist on this one.

My question for you: How do you see religion portrayed in science fiction movies? Is it dismissive? Would you prefer religion not intrude in your science fictional cinema? Are you somewhere in the vast middle? Tell me your thoughts on the subject. I want to know.

—December 4, 2008 Next 117, Previous 221

Attending the SciFi Court: 007 and *Repo Man*

I've spent the last week traveling the width and breadth of this great North American continent of ours and wherever I go people want to get into a debate with me, per my column a few weeks ago (see page 7 "Passing Judgment on *Indiana Jones* and Other Pseudo SciFi Movies") over now I judge what movies count as science fiction. This is what I get for opening my big mouth, I suppose, but the debates did get me thinking more about this obviously divisive topic.

A lot of my discussions centered on the argument that a movie's status as scifi is dependent upon the percentage of the movie that's "science fictional" that is, if a movie contains enough science fictional gadgets or creatures or concepts, it eventually becomes science fiction. This is why *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* or the Coen brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There* or (my favorite) Alex Cox's *Repo Man* are not science fiction, even though each of them features a key scene involving UFOs. At the end of the day, or so it's been argued to me, one minute of scifi isn't enough to clutch these flicks against our geeky chests and proclaim them official property.

The problem with this theory is that a significant number of science fiction geeks feel pretty strongly that any amount of science fictional material makes a movie or book or TV show scifi. This single drop of blood philosophy has almost a tit for tat flavor to it. If the screenwriters and producers are going to make their jobs easier by positing technology that doesn't quite exist, we get to claim that flick in the name of science fiction, so there. This is why I know people who not only believe *Repo Man* is scifi, they will fight you on the matter. Seriously, man. The spittle will *fling*. I've seen it. I've been sprayed with it. It's not pretty.

In the earnest desire to avoid further spittle, allow me to suggest a refinement to the "percentage" theory of scifi which is simply this: **Whether a movie counts as science fiction depends on whether the science fiction elements are crucial to the plot.** Crucial to the plot in this case means that if you pull out these elements, the story collapses, it literally cannot go on because the mechanisms that move it forwards no longer exist. If that's the case, it's science fiction. If your movie is still standing, then what you've got is another genre with some scifi thrown in for flavoring.

Applying this new theory to *Repo Man* and our other two contenders, we see that none of them are science fiction because if you dropped the UFO elements—though you might lose a chunk of humor, a bit of allegorical resonance and smudge of random weirdness—the stories themselves would not be materially harmed.

Another excellent example of this to my mind is the James Bond series. I know several people who will swear up and down that by dint of all his gadgets and the preponderance of laser welding subplots, James Bond is fundamentally a science fiction hero. I see it differently. Get rid of the gadgets (as the last two chapters in the series essentially did) and both James Bond and his plots

still work. Even the laser wielding satellites are mere window dressing to what's really going on in the story. *Goldeneye*, which featured a laser wielding satellite *in the title* was actually about Bond working through a betrayal by his best friend and fellow spy. The satellite was the MacGuffin (the arbitrary object that got the movie rolling and kept it ticking), not the central plot point. For true sci-fi Bond, you have only to go to *Moonraker* to content yourself.

The beauty of looking at possibly science fictional movies this way is that doing so gives you a nuts and bolts view of cinematic storytelling. You become aware of just how often screenwriters and filmmakers use science fiction as a shortcut and a crutch to get out of whatever plot corner they've written themselves into. You also realize just how often sci-fi is used as a spectacle to make you feel like you got your money's worth (see again, Bond). In a way, it's nice to know that Hollywood can't live without science fiction, even in movies that are not themselves sci-fi.

What are your thoughts? Does my revised theory pass muster?

—January 22, 2009 Next 91, Previous 9

Some Candidates for the Next *Children of Men*

For various reasons, I've recently been thinking about science fiction books making the jump to movies. In the past, some books have transitioned well — *Planet of the Apes*, *Children of Men* and *Jurassic Park* come to mind — and some have not. Hello, *Dune*! But hope springs eternal, and I think certain sci-fi books could make really interesting movies — if they were done right. Which books? Well, I'm glad you asked. As it happens, I have with me a partial list, in no particular order.

Snow Crash (Neal Stephenson). Frankly, any of Stephenson's novels would make a terrific flick — with the exception of his aptly named Baroque Cycle trilogy, which need to be multi-year television series. But if I had to pick one, I'd go with *Snow Crash* because from the ridiculously funny pizza delivery at the start, the book never stops coming at you. And, let's face it, everyone loves the idea of a katana-wielding, super-geek-squaring-off-against-the-dogmatic-forces-of-evil. This story would need a director with an offbeat, jazzy sense of pacing. I nominate Guy Ritchie or Danny Boyle.
Could it happen? There's nothing in the works, but this is one of those books I expect will hit screens eventually.

Grass (Sheri Tepper). One of my all-time favorite sci-fi novels, this one's got everything. A fascinating new world with an equally fascinating land-story relevant ecology, a strong female lead, a mystery worth solving and, best of all, large, malevolent dragon-like creatures who kill humans just for the hell of it. If I were a movie producer, this is the book I would grab, and then I would grab Peter Jackson or Alfonso Cuaron to direct. And then I would see it on a 53-foot IMAX screen.
Could it happen? Tepper seems to fly under the radar, so I don't hold out great hope for this making it to the big screen, but I'd be happy to be proven wrong.

The Forever War (Joe Haldeman). This story of a soldier's service stretching across both lightyears and then centuries was an instant sci-fi classic when it debuted at the tail end of the Vietnam era, winning both the Hugo and the Nebula awards and becoming a cornerstone example of how the genre looks at war, the other cornerstone being *Starship Troopers*. With a new corps of soldiers returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, it's relevant once again, and could make a terrific, thoughtful picture.
Could it happen? It certainly could, because it's been optioned by Ridley Scott, who, as it happens, would have been my first choice to handle this particular classic.

Little Brother (Cory Doctorow). Author Cory Doctorow is a rabble rouser on the topic of electronic and civil rights. The latter is in full evidence as he hits his authorial stride with this story about a young San Franciscan who starts a youth rebellion against the U.S. government when its response to terror becomes terrorizing its own citizens. The story is timely, and it would be a cool project for a fearless teenage cast and an equally fearless, possibly indie-minded director.
Could it happen? The book hit the *New York Times* bestseller list and is a prime candidate for Hugo and Nebula award nominations this year. With that sort of buzz, it's not hard to see someone in Hollywood taking interest.

Perdido Street Station (China Mieville). This book is more "weird fantasy" than straight ahead sci-fi, but I don't care. Mieville has created a world that combines the best of steampunk aesthetics, "new wave" sci-fi literary sensibilities, gothic creepiness, proletariat revolution and plain old freaky invention, and makes it live and breathe and shamble toward you while you can't decide to scream or just admire the craft. I'd do both — and hope the adaptations also got the type of visually inventive director the source material deserves.
Could it happen? The story is not a traditional, straightforward Hollywood narrative, and imposing one of those might break it. Its best chance of adaptation may be outside of Hollywood, perhaps in France, in which case I nominate Jean-Pierre Jeunet to direct.

Now, as I mentioned, this is an incomplete list. I'm interested in finding out which books *you* would like to get the cinematic treatment, and which filmmakers you think should put them up there. One request: For our purposes, you can skip my own work and focus on other writers.

So do tell. Who knows, maybe someone in Hollywood is listening.

—January 29, 2009 Next 223, Previous 89

Lights! Camera! Literature! Good SF Movie Novelizations Like *The Abyss* and *E.T.*

Oooh a question in e mail And you know how I love those

> Can you explain the whole point of movie novelizations? Science fiction movies has lots of them and they kind of drive me crazy **because they're mostly bad.**

Well the point of movie novelizations is simple There's money to be made It's no secret at a movie is made from a book the existence of the movie drives people to pick up the book even if the movie adaptation is not particularly good There's an apocryphal story that someone complained to Robert Heinlein's widow that the movie version of *Starship Troopers* was a travesty compared to the novel to which she replied that because of the movie the book itself had once again shot up into the bestseller charts So the movie regardless of quality, **was doing the book a favor.**

If movie adaptations drive people to original books it's not that much of a leap to believe that they would also drive people to novelizations books adapted from movies rather than the other way around And the secret is largely correct as novelizations of popular movies (for example the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy) often find themselves lodged on bestseller lists selling hundreds of thousands of copies Even creative flops can move tons of books *The Chronicles of Riddick* didn't set the box office on fire but its novelization by Alan Dean Foster, the patron saint of science fiction movie novelizations) was a decent **sized hit.**

As for the contention that science fiction movie novelizations are bad we I'm of two minds on this First, yes some of them are bad although that has as much to do with process as with any perceived deficiencies of the writers Many novelizations are written from early drafts of screenplays and have to be kicked out by the writer in a matter of weeks, speed rather than brilliance is the goal here As a result lots of novelizations are best described as workmanlike and might feature scenes plots and indeed endings at variance to the actual finished movie These are all strikes against novelizations it be sure

But it doesn't *have* to be that way Given a good enough writer and also filmmakers who treat the novelization as something more than just a marketing tool you can get good results A fine example of that actually are the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy novelizations—possibly because the people at Lucasfilm have so extensively integrated their tie in books with the *Star Wars* universe that they recognize the value of getting good writers and giving them room to write As a result, the novelizations end up better than the movies they're based on Reed Matthew Stover's treatment of *Revenge of the Sith* and tells me it doesn't give gravity and context to the candy colored mess that was the movie

Some other movie novelizations worth checking out for themselves (if you can find them):

The Abyss: Author Orson Scott Card somewhat famously agreed to do the novelization of this movie only if he could develop and delve into the characters backstories. James Cameron was pleased enough with the effort that he gave early chapters to his production's stars to give them insight into their characters.

E.T.: William Kotzwinkle's novelization sold like hotcakes and deserved to because he filled it with gentle humor—in particular expanding E.T.'s relationship with the family dog and his infatuation with Elliot's mom (because come on, who didn't have a little crush on Dee Wallace?). Kotzwinkle worked with *E.T.* screenwriter Melissa Matheson to get the details of this one just right.

Dark Star: I mentioned earlier that Alan Dean Foster was the patron saint of science fiction movie novelization authors in no small part because he's done so damn many of them, including ghosting the original novelization of *Star Wars*. Not all of them are great, but this one—one of his first, in fact—captures the anarchic humor and spirit of John Carpenter's original work (which, incidentally, you can see in full on AMC's nifty new B Movies site).

Buckaroo Banzai: This is one of the rare examples of a novelization of a movie that's written by the flicks screenwriter. But Earl Mac Rauch didn't just confine himself to the story onscreen—he filled his book with asides, footnotes and a distinctly literary and pulpy narrator. Easily the weirdest novelization you'll read.

Long story short: there are good sci-fi movie novelizations out there, though (as with anything of quality) sometimes you have to look. On that note, are there any science fiction movie novelizations you've enjoyed?

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Hand Me a Hanky—
These SciFi Tearjerkers Choke Me Up

Now you know that I love me some science fiction movies, and I'm happy to say that sci-fi does a lot of things well. But there's one thing that the genre does notably poorly, and that is make people cry—which is to say, to wring genuine tears of emotion out of them. There are any number of reasons for this, starting with the fact that sci-fi flicks usually lend themselves to action and adventure, which are notably tear-free genres—no one will expect you to tear up at the upcoming *Transformers* flick, for example, unless they are tears of pain.

Tear-inducing science fiction is so rare, in fact, that I sat down to think of which ones have actually made me cry, and came up with damn few. Here are the movies that made me reach for my tissues.

1. *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982): I think this one is the obvious choice. I blubbered like a child watching it. Of course, the first time I saw it, I was a child, so I think I get a pass. But I've watched it since then and still get all misty-eyed. *E.T.* was the movie that gave us the adjective "Spielberg-esque"—that framing of wonder inside story, direction and cinematography that seemingly yanks tears straight out of one's ducts.

Whatever the movie's minor sins may be, it earned the emotions it wrenched out of the viewer. Melissa Mathison's script took the time to develop the relationship between Elliott, the suburban boy, and E.T., lost extraterrestrial, and Steven Spielberg knew how to show it on the screen. It's a testament to how good that *E.T.*'s massive success spawned a series of mawkishly lame '80s follow-ups, many produced by Spielberg, that reduced the "Spielberg-esque" technique to schtick. Watch *Harry and the Hendersons* or **batteries not included* and you'll see what I mean.

Spielberg himself later on tried a refined iteration of it in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, with Haley Joel Osment playing both Elliott and E.T. It didn't work, but it was interesting because it failed to work in an entirely new direction. That's part of what makes Spielberg a great director. He fails at a much higher level than other filmmakers.

2. *WALL-E* (2008): Specifically, the scene in the garbage room when EVE tries to tell WALL-E he's the most important thing in her—and WALL-E reminds her she has other priorities. It's not a huge moment in the structure of the story—at that point the action climax is still several minutes away—but it's a huge emotional payoff because it shows that *WALL-E*'s filmmakers got what was fundamental about the lovesick bot. That he cares about others, and that his own happiness would not be complete if someone he loved settled for less than their purpose, even for his sake.

This is a complex and difficult point to get across in any movie, that the Pixar people did it in a movie whose hero was a glorified trash compactor's

one of the more amazing stunts in recent cinema. Heck, I get choked up just thinking about it now.

3. *Creator* (1985): This little known gem is science fictional mostly by courtesy. The main character, played by a gloriously slumming Peter O'Toole, is a Nobel-winning scientist trying to clone his dead wife, which is something we still can't manage a quarter century later. And unlike the previous two flicks, this one's tear-inducing moment is sort of shameless, since it involves a very young (and very cute) Virginia Madsen in a coma and her boyfriend Vincent Spano trying to talk her out of her vegetative state.

Basically, it's melodrama, stunt acting and screenwriting, and I feel like a schmoe falling for it — and yet *every single time* I watch it, damn, I issue city. I think some of my susceptibility to the movie is that I saw it when I was a teenager and there was a girl I had a huge crush on, so I imagined her as Virginia Madsen and me as Vincent Spano, you know, like one does. But I suspect it has more to do with the fact that I'm just fundamentally easy to make cry.

And that's it. Three movies in the entire genre guaranteed to tear me up, which seems disproportionately small compared to the thousands of flicks out there. So tell me: Are there any other sci-fi movies that have actually and genuinely made you cry?

—June 4, 2009 Next 187, Previous 17

Who's Your Daddy?
Rating SciFi's Movie Fathers

Father's Day is this Sunday, which made me curious—as I so often am when a deadline is approaching—as to how dads are portrayed in science fiction. Are they good? Bad? Misunderstood? Let's find out with this sampling of future dad-dom.

Darth Vader: (*Star Wars*)
Father to Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia
He's pretty much the stereotypical bad dad, isn't he? Aside from skipping out on his kids youth, he tortures his daughter in *Star Wars*, chops off the hand of his son in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and chooses work over family for a disturbingly long time in *Return of the Jedi*. Before you say it, I don't buy the argument that he didn't know he was a dad. Vader knew Luke was his son before he lopped off the kid's mitt. And call me crazy, but the time to stop your boss from trying to murder your only son with electric bolts is before he starts, not several minutes in when your kid's smoking like a grill full of baby back ribs. It's nice Luke forgives him and all, but Luke always was a bit of a sap.

Dad Score: F

Dr. Eldon Tyrell: (*Blade Runner*)
Adoptive father to Rov Batty, Pris, entire Replicant race
On one hand, he genetically engineered his children to be smart, strong and capable, which is a plus. On the other hand, he also engineered them to have four-year lifespans, which seems kind of mean. And more than mean, it seems like some sort of reverse Oedipal thing. Really, there's a whole set of therapy sessions there. Also, the scene where Tyrell tries to convince Batty that it's OK he's got the lifespan of a chipmunk because at least he got to see the universe? Full of parental condescension, which almost justifies Batty driving his thumbs into dad's brain via the eyeballs. Almost.

Dad Score: D

Kyle Reese: (*The Terminator*)
Father to John Connor
I suppose you could knock him for not being around as John Connor grows up, but being killed defending the future mother of your child from an almost-appable killing machine clever disguised as an Austrian bodybuilder is an awfully good excuse. If anyone here is acting questionably, it's the son. Connor sends Reese back in time ostensibly to protect Sarah Connor, but in fact to impregnate her so Connor can be born—and he knows that Reese isn't going to survive the trip, not that he tells Reese any of that. If I were Reese, I'd kind of want to know these details. So great dad, but the kid's got serious issues.

Dad Score: B+

Duke Leto Atreides: (*Dune*)
Father to Paul Atreides
Well, he's a busy man—they he rules an entire planet—so he doesn't spend a huge amount of time with his son. But he makes sure the boy is tutored by all the right people, so at least he's supportive in a distant and preoccupied way. You could easily argue that taking over Arrakis—which everyone knew meant walking into a Harkonnen trap—was bad parenting since someone tried to assassinate Paul the first day, and then during the coup they planned to slit the kid's throat. These are clear indications the planet is not a suitable environment. But then, being on Arrakis *does* allow Paul to become emperor of the whole damn universe, which wouldn't have happened had Duke Leto stayed on Caladan. So in the end he positions his kid to do well. And isn't that what dads are supposed to do?

Dad Score: B

Mr. Incredible: (*The Incredibles*)
Father to Violet, Dash and Jack Jack
A fine example of how a dad can become a better dad. When the movie starts Mr. Incredible is loving but clearly inattentive to his family because of his own self-esteem issues—it's not easy working as a claims adjuster when you used to *fight crime*. Later, however, he learns that his own self-centeredness has caused him to neglect his loving family. He's able to resolve his own problems and become a better dad—though it helps that they've all become superheroes again, fighting bad guys in snazzy matching uniforms and such. It still counts as family time, and tallys towards Mr. Incredible's dad karma.

Dad Score: A

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John Scalzi's SciFi Writing Contest

This week out here in what's occasionally called "the real world" I am an instructor at Viable Paradise a week long writing workshop for aspiring science fiction and fantasy authors Here we critique stories and novel excerpts lecture on writing and publishing and have Q&A sessions about the writing life Another thing we do is give our students writing assignments to help spur their creativity and you know, make them feel like they're getting their money's worth

But then I thought "Why let the Viable Paradise students have all the fun?" Below you will find a selection of writing assignments based on various science fiction movies and or science fiction filmmakers Write up one or more and put them into the comments below one writing assignment per comment keep them short and punchy Here's the tricky part I will select my favorite from the bunch and AMC will award its author a DVD set of the original *The Prisoner* It's that easy! Have fun.

1. Write a brief monologue from the point of view of the creature who burst out of the chest of John Hurt in *Alien*.

2. Whilst visiting an alien world to collect plant samples one of your crew ran afoul of the local sentient life forcing you to cut short the mission and then subsequently mount a rescue attempt to retrieve said crew member Write the discipline report for the crew member, whom the local sentients labeled as *E T*

3. Will Smith has agreed to do your next movie! Congratulations Now pitch that movie to a studio executive In addition to Smith the movie must contain at least four of the following ten elements A toothbrush a small primate known as the Aye Aye a mad scientist a robot who learns to love shape shifting zombie cats a sexy podiatrist a 1972 AMC Gremlin, Red Vines a ticking time bomb any one member of either Duran Duran or the Jonas Brothers depending on your generational inclinations

4. You are the founding member of the Jar Jar Binks Reclamation Project who has come to the San Diego Comic Con to spread the Gospel of Jar Jar You have one hundred fifty words to make your argument to the assembled masses Go

5. Summary you are at an academic film conference to give a presentation The title of your talk *I was Born The Most important Film Director of the Last Decade* Provide the synopsis paragraph of this talk and or recount how you escaped from the auditorium in which you gave the talk alive

6. Write a short monologue from the point of view of The Terminator NOT Due to circumstances beyond the filmmakers control Arnold Schwarzenegger

is not available to play the role of The Terminator. The role of The Terminator will instead be played by C-3PO. Please incorporate this fact into your monologue.

7. You are a screenwriter. Show us a short scene from your upcoming *Matrix* sequel entitled *Agent Smith: Telemarketer*.

8. The movie *Dune* has been remade. The name of the newest version is *Muad'Dib! The Musical*, starring Hugh Jackman as Paul. You are a critic. Write the review.

9. Stung by the reviews of *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* that describe the flick as being utterly without any redeeming qualities, director Michael Bay declares that the next *Transformers* movie will have a story and script based on one of the plays of William Shakespeare. In no more than two paragraphs, write a synopsis of that movie, using any Shakespeare play you like. NOTE: No fair using *Titus Andronicus*.

10. A group of science fiction sidekick characters have come together for their monthly support group happy hour. The event takes place at TGI Friday's or some other moderately-priced restaurant chain. Provide us a glimpse of the transcript from that meeting.

—October 8, 2009 Next 101, Previous 25

Three Cheers for Chewbacca, SciFi's Ultimate Sidekick

Hey folks before we get to this week's column let me take a moment to announce the winner of last weeks 'writing assignment' contest (see page 99, John Scalzi's SciFi Writing Contest) We received nearly 100 entries, which is pretty awesome, and the entire comment thread is chock full of amusing science fictional goodness which made it exceptionally hard to choose just one But in the end, I was most impressed with this entry by *Louise* (see page 99 John Scalzi's SciFi Writing Contest)—who not only made her 'sidekick meeting" entry highly amusing but also in the course of the entry managed to reference every other writing assignment option as well Well done, Louise well done indeed That coveted DVD set of the original series of *The Prisoner* is yours And thanks to everyone else for playing along.

Louise's choice of the 'sidekick meeting' assignment was also prescient because as it happens I've spent the last few days thinking about sidekicks in movies—particularly in science fiction—and what qualities make for a perfect scifi sidekick After careful consideration, I have, in fact, determined the perfect science fictional sidekick

It is—of course!—Chewbacca.

Why? Oh, let us count the ways.

1. He's alien: Dude's a seven foot piece of shag who walks around naked save for a bandolier He communicates by howling He'll rip the arms off a droid just to make a point about sportsmanship Face it you're not going to run across anyone like that on a day-to-day basis His very presence in the *Star Wars* series reminds you that there's more to life in the Empire than all those humans running about Chewbacca is science fiction, in hairy, two meter form

2. He's not *too* alien: At the same time, he's not a gelatinous mass or a cold blooded reptile he's furry and almost kind of cuddly has sympathetic blue eyes and a Scooby Doo-like streak of neurosis in him allowing Han to berate him from time to time in an amusing fashion The dog like aspect of Chewbacca is no coincidence as George Lucas originally modeled Chewie after his own canine pal a ~~Bouvier des Flandres~~ Alaskan Malamute named Indiana Yes indeed So while he's definitely not human he's also quite relatable Just don't ask him to fetch Wookiees hate that.

3. He can act: Chewbacca is funny He does a great second take He does sad (see *Empire Strikes Back* when the base doors are closed And really, no one else in science fiction quite does angry like he does That he does them all as sidekick reaction shots makes his skill even greater it's like what dancers say of Ginger Rogers She danced every step Fred Astaire did backwards and in heels When a sidekick makes you *feel* he's doing his job and then some

4. He's competent: There's something to be said for a sidekick who only works as comic relief—see C-3PO in this category—but even better is the sort of laconic pal who can do pretty much anything you ask of him. And really, that's Chewie. He can pilot a starship, he can repair a droid shot apart by Imperial stormtroopers, he can strangle a traitorous former friend, and he can act the part of a hapless prisoner to get rescuers into guarded areas—not just once but twice! Is there anything he *can't* do? Besides speak human? Which brings us to the next part:

5. He's comfortable in his role: Never once in the movies do you get the sense that Chewbacca is looking enviously at Han Solo's captain's chair and thinking to himself *man, how long do I have to hang around with this wanoo until I get to sit there.* Why? Because Chewie is comfortable with himself as a person and a sidekick. He's *so* comfortable, in fact, that he actually lets other people talk for him. I strongly believe Chewbacca could speak human *if* he so chose—but he prefers to let the other characters shine. That's the sort of selfless assist to others that makes him perfect to the sidekick role.

The downside to this subtle expertise in the sidekick role is that Chewbacca is not always given his due. Everyone remembers the slight given Chewbacca at the end of *Star Wars*: Luke and Han get big shiny medals for blowing up the Death Star, and what does Chewbacca get? His fur brushed out for the medal ceremony. Did Chewie complain? No. But I'm sure cheering during the 1997 MTV Movie Awards when Chewie finally got that medal he was owed—slung about his neck by none other than Carrie Fisher herself.

Yes, maybe I reared up a bit, I won't deny it. But I will say that it's nice when the sidekick gets his moment in the spotlight. I specially a sidekick as complete as Chewbacca. The sidekick's sidekick, the sidekick all other sidekicks can only hope to be: only to settle for plucky comic relief. Just ask 3PO about that.

—October 15, 2009 Next 241, Previous 99

How *Inception* Is Not *Dreamscape 2: The Quickening*

I was talking with an old friend of mine about the summer releases this year and our general feeling of utter blahness about the whole summer season when I said to him "Well look at it this way at least you have *Inception* to look forward to" naming the upcoming film in which Leonardo DiCaprio takes a stroll through other peoples dreams directed by Christopher Nolan

"Oh, *that*" he said "I dont get that one at all Its the same basic concept as *Dreamscape*, and I already saw that I don't know why anyone would get excited about whats basically yet another remake"

One reason of course is that *Dreamscape* came out 25 years ago, i.e., at a time when a lot of *Inception*'s opening weekend audience was still in a haploid state In that respect it's similar to asking why tween girls are excited about the Jonas Brothers when theres already been the New Kids on the Block

I have a tween age daughter here at home Every time I point out to her that there's an earlier analogue of every single piece of music she likes she looks at me as if to say "You poor sad, bading little man You just dont get it, do you?" She does it with love mind you But she still does it Likewise telling a 21-year-old guy that he can get pretty much the same experience with a quarter century-old flick starring Dennis Quaid and directed by the guy who did *The Stepfather* that he'll get with a Leonardo DiCaprio movie directed by the guy who did *The Dark Knight* is likely to get you a similar result

But beyond that I would take exception to the argument that *Inception* is basically a remake What the two films have in common as a central concept or plot point in this case, both films feature a man who can enter other peoples dreams and in doing so learn things about them or change the course of their lives Its a pretty specific plot point, to be sure But its also like saying that, because the film *9* features a main character made out of bits of cloth that tries to rescue a fellow voodoo doll from the clutches of evil, it's a remake of *Toy Story* Anyone who's seen both films knows that's not the case despite certain thematic elements they're quite different stories Heck *Dark City* and *The Matrix* have so much in common including production dates that the latter used the leftover sets of the former And yet for all their similarities, they are two very different viewing experiences

I've been pretty consistent in my opinion that Hollywood goes a little too often to the well of sequels and remakes but philosophically I don't really have any problem with filmmakers dipping out of the same well of inspiration or playing with the same basic ideas and running variations of those themes especially when the filmmakers themselves have wildly divergent perspectives As an example of this, I give you Michael Herr's Vietnam War memoir *Dispatches* which served as a partial inspiration for at least two films In the hands of Francis Ford Coppola it was transmuted into *Apocalypse Now* In the hands of Stanley Kubrick *Full Metal Jacket* That's not a bad spread there

Inception doesn't have similarities just to *Dreamscape*, of course. You could spend a merry day name checking influences from a number of cinematic predecessors, including the aforementioned *Matrix* and *Dark City* and, of course, director Christopher Nolan's own Batman movies. But for me, as a viewer, the question isn't whether a filmmaker uses the same basic ideas as one film or borrows other ideas from another film and outright steals them from a third. The question for me is what the filmmakers do once they start putting those ideas together as a film. Do it poorly as a filmmaker, and you'll be told you've created a cheap knockoff. Do it well, and you'll be told you've breathtakingly reinvented the concept.

And this, to my mind, is a fine reason for my friend to check out *Inception* even if he's seen *Dreamscape*: to watch a filmmaker either master his influences and predecessors or be swallowed up by them. In that respect, my friend has access to a joy that the 21-year-old who's never seen *Dreamscape* does not: the excitement of watching something that's been done before get done again -- possibly (and definitely, in this case) even better.

—July 14, 2010 *Next 273, Previous 337*

Is Science Fiction This Era's Western?

Hey folks. The e-mail I'm going to answer this week features an epiphany. How often does that happen? Here's the e-mail:

> I was watching the trailer for next year's *Cowboys & Aliens* movie when I had an epiphany. Science fiction and Westerns are really a lot alike, separated by several decades. Both are mainly action-oriented, both are meant to appeal to young men. The difference is now westerns are dead. Do you think science fiction will also go the way of westerns, and what will replace it if it does?

With all due apologies to my correspondent, I don't know that the idea that science fiction is the new Western is all that groundbreaking — if nothing else, the first *Toy Story* made it explicit that the frontier of space was replacing the Wild West as the focus of the imagination when it had Buzz Lightyear eclipse Woody as the coolest. And while Westerns aren't 100 percent dead — a couple a year still pop out — they've gone to a kind of meta-kind of arty-kind of self-referential place and have been there at least since *Unforgiven* in 1992. When the big Western film of the year is a remake of *True Grit* by the Coen brothers, and the most financially successful Western of the past decade is the one about two gay cowboys, it's pretty clear this isn't your grandfather's Western genre anymore.

Meanwhile, science fiction and its overlapping brethren genres of fantasy and comic book films have become the places where Hollywood goes to draw young men to the theaters — although not *only* young men. Science fiction has had a good run of it — it's been a consistent draw for that demographic for more than three decades — and I don't see it looking like it's going to run out of steam anytime soon.

But could it go the way of the Western? Sure. Tastes change, and even during science fiction's reign since *Star Wars* came out in 1977, there have been times when it took a backseat to other genres, from fantasy to cop films to comedies. That said, there are a few things science fiction has going for it that Westerns don't, which can help contribute to its longevity.

1. It's infinite.

The general era in which the classic Western took place is between 1850 and 1900, with the 1880s the era of the gunfight at the O.K. Corral being ground zero for Western mythology, and it's all — by definition — taking place in the U.S. West. Science fiction, on the other hand, can take place today or in a time close enough to it not to matter, see *Iron Man*, *Inception*, *District 9*, *Transformers* — or in the far future (*Avatar*, *Star Trek*, *Wall-E*) or even the past (the aforementioned *Cowboys & Aliens*, *Back to the Future Part III*, and even technically speaking all of the *Star Wars* films). Nor is it tied to any one location; it can and

does happen anywhere in the universe it wants to. This gives filmmakers quite a lot of ways to at least superficially keep their films novel.

2. It doesn't have to deal with uncomfortable facts about our nation's history.

Hey, remember how the Native Americans were always the bad guys in those Westerns? Yeah, that's kind of awkward now. Not to mention all the other racial stereotyping in the Western genre or the really sort of horrible things about the actual U.S. West back in the day. If you're a filmmaker, you can spend your time tiptoeing around those various land mines, or you can put everything in the future, where the bad guys can be aliens, or robots, or alien robots — not humans of any sort at all, unless they're zombies. Which really takes the pressure off. This is not to say filmmakers today can't and don't make fools of themselves—hello, Jar Jar—but it does mean that science fiction as a genre doesn't have to deal with the real-world baggage that Westerns do.

3. It's supported in the culture.

Science fiction isn't just popular at the movies. It's a huge segment of the video game industry, as anyone who has lost hundreds of hours this year playing StarCraft II or Halo: Reach will tell you. It's perennially popular on television with its own cable network as well as shows on major networks. Rumor has it that people even write books and comic books in the genre. Westerns? Not so much at the moment; they're hanging on in books, but Western-themed video games and television shows are few and far between. This matters because every medium feeds others. Now, science fiction can do time in these other mediums as well. Western-themed writing and television once thrived, but its health in these other fields is a positive sign for its films.

So no, I don't expect science fiction to go the way of Westerns anytime soon. On the other hand, if *Cowboys & Aliens* is the hit its filmmakers hope it is, it might breathe a little more life into the Western genre. Wouldn't that be interesting?

—December 1, 2010 Next 283, Previous 281

How Science Fiction Movies Can Help You Write Novels

As many of you may know, when I'm not here writing about science fiction movies, I'm often off writing science fiction novels. And in that capacity, this is a big week for me. My new novel *Fuzzy Nation* came out on Tuesday, and even as we speak, I've begun a book tour to promote it.

What you may not know is that in many ways there is a direct relationship between my books—me as a fiction writer—and movies. Long before I was a published novelist, I was a full-time film critic. I spent a lot of time looking at story. So when it was time to write my own stories, some of the things I learned about storytelling from films made their way into my novels.

What did I learn? Here are three things—and I'll use the recent *Star Trek*[2] film as my example (if for no other reason than it's a "reboot" like my novel is (of the 1962 novel *Little Fuzzy* by H. Beam Piper).

1. When in doubt, use a three-act structure for your story.

Most films these days feature a "three-act" structure because it's both useful and exciting. So, in the first act of the recent *Star Trek* film, we're introduced to James Kirk and all the rest of the *Enterprise* crew. In the second act, Kirk and the *Enterprise* are thrown into battle and experience setbacks at the hand of the villain, Nero, and in the third act, Kirk has to take control of *Enterprise*, defeat the villain, and save the universe.

Novels don't have to follow this same structure—and many don't, and not every novel should—but it's a storytelling mode people just seem to get, so it's one I often use. Thus, in my newest book, we meet our protagonist, Jack Halloway, and the mysterious creatures known as "Fuzzys" (act one). Jack's life is changed when he learns that the Fuzzys might be intelligent, a fact which threatens the corporation that he works for (act two), and Jack has to decide whether to help the Fuzzys against the corporation (act three).

2. Get your audience right into the action.

In *Star Trek*, the opening scene has a Federation starship, the USS *Kelvin*, encounter a strange, massive alien ship; then there's a space battle; and the audience's blood is pumping right from the start. But, and this is important, it's not *entirely* gratuitous audience manipulation: this action-packed prologue serves to set up back story and some initial conditions for the ride to come. It's a fast, smart way to front-load information that the audience will need later, while at the same time making them happy they're in that theater seat.

A fast start is not needed for every novel, but there are times it's useful. I used this sort of opening in my novel *The Android's Dream*, in which I had one character try to kill another in an unusual way. The manner in which the attempted murder happens—to put it positively, it involves the intestinal tract—grabs readers from the first line of the book. And while the prospective killing is

being arranged, I'm able to slip in information about the world of the story and human-type place in it—all sooner than later, when it would just slow down the storytelling. When it works, it's great.

3. Let your characters establish themselves with their words and actions. Filmmaking is a visual medium, so it's difficult to get inside characters' heads. You can try with voiceovers or narration, but that doesn't always work (see *Dune* and the original cut of *Blade Runner* for examples of this). Filmmakers work with what the audience can see and hear. The swagger and smart-assery of Kirk, the precise logical emotionless of Spock, the cranky-weary sardonicism of Bones.

Novels allow a lot more leeway to show both internal thought and narration, but one of the things I ask myself when I'm writing characters is how much of the person I can reveal through what they are doing or saying. This is the old "show, don't tell" advice applied to the people in your story. I could tell you what sort of person my character Jack Holloway is, but it's better if *he* tells you. Because in the story, he's the guy you're going to be spending your time with, not me. My job as the writer, at least in this story, is to move the scenery around. That's best done as invisibly as possible.

Now, to be clear, a novel is not a film, and novels don't have to be like films. But good writing lessons are where you find them. Even when you find them in movie theaters.

—May 11, 2011 Next 295, Previous 169

Awards and Brickbats

Ridley Scott Deserves an Oscar, Even If It's an Honorary One

Every year (or close enough), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gives out an honorary Academy Award in addition to its usual slate of Oscars for best picture, actor, director and so on. Historically this honorary award was given to recognize folks in categories for which there was no standard award (Walt Disney got one in 1932, for creating Mickey Mouse, and Shirley Temple got one in 1935 for well being Shirley Temple) but as the number of regular prizes expanded, the honorary award morphed into a crass lifetime achievement award, given to folks who have otherwise slipped between the Oscar cracks in their long and distinguished careers. Such was the case with directors Robert Altman and Sidney Lumet and actor Peter O'Toole in recent years.

I'm not in the Academy—seems they are sticklers about who they let in, and guys blathering about movies on a Web site don't count—but I do have an excellent idea for who they should be thinking about handing down one of those honorary awards to: Director Ridley Scott.

Scott, of course, will be immensely familiar to science fiction fans since he directed two indisputable classics of the genre: 1979's *Alien* and 1982's *Blade Runner*. One could argue that these for these two movies alone, Scott merits lifetime achievement consideration, because the two films have had immense influence on the look and feel not just of science fiction film, but of film in general. But as it happens, Scott's critical contributions to the science fiction genre are just one facet of a film career that genuinely deserves praise and note—and just one piece of the puzzle for his consideration for an honorary Oscar. Let's look at some of the other reasons.

1. Scott is not a one-trick pony.

When people who know of Ridley Scott think of the "Ridley Scott feel," as it were, what comes to their heads is: Epic, massive and awe-inspiring—which makes sense when you are are talking about the director of such gorgeously visually designed films as *Alien*, *Blade Runner* and *Gladiator*. When Scott goes overboard, it can be a bit much—see *Legend*, possibly the most ridiculous fantasy film of the '80s and that's saying something—but it's never less than gorgeous. This visual production fantasia thing Scott's got going is definitely his calling card in the cinematic art.

That said, Scott's first Oscar nomination for Best Director came not with any of his eye poppers, but for 1991's *Thelma & Louise*. The feminist road trip movie/gritty shoot-'em-up was so who-would-have-thunk-it anything the man had directed before that I think people couldn't believe this was from that *Alien* dude. Believe it: under Scott's epic-looking exterior is a director who likes directing stories about people. He did it again with *Matchstick Men*, somewhat less successfully with *A Good Year*, and then managed to fuse both his epic and realist sides for last year's *American Gangster*.

Scott's actual facility with actors is underrated, and given his occasional lapse into empty commercial noisiness (*Black Rain* and *G.I. Jane*, which play like films by *Tony* Scott, not Ridley) it's understandable that people forget that. But at the end of the day, what makes Scott a better director than mechanically-obsessed craftsmen like Michael Bay or George Lucas is that he doesn't need the epic toys to tell a story. He can do it with just the actors in front of the camera.

2. Scott is unlikely to win an actual Best Director award.

Yes, I know. We'd like a man with at least three genuine cinematic classics to his name (*Alien, Blade Runner, Thelma & Louise*) to be bereft of an Oscar. Scott even directed a Best Picture—*Gladiator*—but didn't get the gold statue, and the two other times he's been nominated for Best Director (for *Thelma* and for *Black Hawk Down*) his movie wasn't nominated for Best Picture, which essentially means he had no chance. *American Gangster* was arguably snubbed last year for picture and director. And ultimately, while I think there's a widespread admiration for Scott's craft and commercial sense, I also think he's taken a bit for granted—a director with a good eye but no heart, perhaps, and unfairly—and someone like that's not someone that competes well down the stretch for an Oscar.

Not winning an a Best Director award doesn't mean one isn't, in fact, an excellent director—ask Alfred Hitchcock about this, or honorary recipients Altman or Lumet. It's simply a fact that every year the Oscar race has a different dynamic, and some great directors keep getting the short end of the stick. The honorary award exists at this point to say "hey, now wait a minute," and give someone who deserves recognition that moment. With three Best Director nominations and a billion dollars in domestic box office gross over 30 years, Scott has a good argument for such recognition.

3. He's almost old enough for it now.

Ridley Scott's 71 years old, and the honorary Oscars tend to get doled out when the recipient is in his mid-'70s (with some exceptions. Robert Redford was a spry 64 or so when he got his). He's in his fourth decade of feature film directing, his fifth decade of filmmaking in general, and aside from his work as a film director has had a healthy side career in film production and other visual endeavors, including what is generally regarded as the most influential spot in the history of television advertising. Basically, he's done his time, he's made his mark, and given the number of films he has in pre-production, will still be making it for some time—and, alas, he's not getting any younger.

Add it up. The man deserves an Oscar. An honorary Oscar will do just fine, thanks.

Is *The Dark Knight* Oscar Ready?

Got an e-mail from a reader:

> I have a question for you about *The Dark Knight* (does it count as science fiction? Oh, well. It's a big hit and the critics liked it, and people are talking about an Oscar for Heath Ledger. But what about the movie? Could it get nominated for Best Picture? Could it win?

First: Is *The Dark Knight* science fiction? Only glancingly. It's not science fictional the way say *Iron Man* or *The Incredible Hulk* are. But superhero films in general can be lumped in with science fiction/fantasy films because they share a number of relevant characteristics. For example: many (though not all) are amped-up effects happy spectaculars aimed at popcorn-shoveling young men. And in general—and why I want to talk about it here—outside the technical categories (sound and visual effects and editing), they're mostly ignored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Will *The Dark Knight* break through anyway and get nominated for Best Picture? Actually, I *do* think it's possible. And the reasons are in line with what my e-mailer has pointed out:

1. It's immensely financially successful: *The Dark Knight* powered past $300 mil. on its domestic box office in ten days, and by the time you read this, it will have overtaken *Iron Man* as the highest grossing film of the year. You think: Big deal, lots of science fiction/fantasy hits make a lot of money but don't get Best Picture nods. True. But the sci-fi films that *do* get Oscar nods are always among the top grossing films for their year: *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T.*, *Ghost* (yes, *Ghost*), *The Sixth Sense*. And all the *Lord of the Rings* films. All of them were either the top-grossing film of their year or right behind at number two. *The Dark Knight* clears that hurdle pretty easily.

2. It's critically lauded: *The Dark Knight* has a 94% rating at Rotten Tomatoes—which makes it currently one of the best reviewed films of the year in any genre, much less the superhero genre. And this also matters: If you look at all the other sci-fi Best Picture nominees above, you'll note that with the exception of *Ghost*, each of the films was also hugely critically lauded at its time (*Ghost* did OK with the critics, actually, just not to the level of *E.T.* or *The Dark Knight*). The Academy likes having the critical backup to go with the financial windfall.

3. It's got at least one Oscar-nominatable performance by a human: Yes, it matters. The largest block of the Academy is the actors branch, if they're willing to sign off on a film for a performance, they're more likely to sign off on

it for the big prize. This for me explains *Ghost*: the actors nominated Whoopi Goldberg for her supporting role, and while they were at it dropped *Ghost* in for the last Best Picture slot on their nomination ballot. And indeed, with science fiction and fantasy, the nominatable performance is usually a supporting one: Alec Guinness in *Star Wars*, Goldberg for *Ghost*, Toni Collette and Haley Joel Osment for *Sixth Sense* and Ian McKellen for *The Fellowship of the Ring*. At this point, if Heath Ledger *doesn't* get a nod there may be riots — not just from the fan boys, but from the actual critics.

4. The director's fame comes from outside the genre: This is one that doesn't show up in the e mail, but I think it's worth noting nonetheless. If a director comes into science fiction or in this case superhero films after being celebrated outside of it, he drags his credibility with him, and it's OK to think about the film seriously because this is a serious director. Thus George Lucas (who had been Oscar nominated for directing *American Graffiti*), Steven Spielberg (*Jaws*) and Peter Jackson (screenplay nomination for *Heavenly Creatures*). Even *Ghostbusters*' Jerry Zucker was better known as a comedy director (*Airplane!*). *The Dark Knight*'s Christopher Nolan made his bones with the twisty artsy *Memento* (for which he received an Oscar screenplay nod) and burnished them with *Insomnia* and *The Prestige*. It's part of why he's getting credit now for elevating the superhero genre.

So what does *The Dark Knight* have going against it? Simply: It's a superhero film, and none of those has ever been nominated for Best Picture before. In deed, none has ever been seriously suggested for Best Picture before, despite the fact that at the very least 1978's *Superman*, 1989's *Batman* and 2004's *Spider Man 2* were all ugatory financially and critically well received enough to make a run for it. The Academy has been historically resistant to genre. It took 50 years for it to nominate a science fiction movie for Best Picture (*Star Wars*), and another 24 years to nominate a fantasy that didn't have singing Munchkins in it (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, which featured little people of a different sort). It's only been 30 years since the 1978 *Superman* graduated superheroes out of serials and B movies; the Academy, notoriously conservative, might still not be ready.

But I think it will be. Here's my prediction: Yes, *The Dark Knight* will be nominated for Best Picture, and I suspect Nolan and Ledger will also get Oscar nods, and the film will also snatch tons of technical nominations.

And besides, that would mean not giving the Best Picture Oscar to *Wall-E*. (see page 77 Science Fiction Is Easy, Comedy Is Hard.)

Do Hugo Winning Novels Make Great Films?

In the world of science fiction, this week is the equivalent of the Oscars and Mardi Gras all rolled into one, because this is the week of the World Science Fiction Convention (generally known as "Worldcon"), which takes place this year in Denver. Earlier in the week, geeks from around the world converged on the Mile High City, and as you read this, they are partying their brains out. The big event of the Worldcon comes Saturday night, however, when the Hugo Awards, honoring the best in science fiction and fantasy in the last year, are announced.

While there are a number of Hugo Awards, the big award of the night is usually Best Novel. This year the books nominated for the award are *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon, *Brasyl* by Ian McDonald, *Rollback* by Robert J. Sawyer, *Halting State* by Charles Stross, and *The Last Colony* by, uh, well, *me*. Whichever of us wins gets to be King of the Geeks for the year, which is nice, but as an aside, it also brings higher visibility to the novel in question, which can lead to bigger sales, more time on the shelves, and from time to time, a crack at seeing that book turned into a movie.

And that brings us to an interesting question. The Hugo Awards represent the finest in written science fiction and fantasy. But do the films made from Best Novel Hugo winners represent the same in cinematic form? Let's go to the list and see.

Interestingly, it's a short list. Despite more than 50 years of Best Novel Hugo winners, a quick scan of the list shows that only three of the Best Novel winners have successfully made the jump to the silver screen. Moving along chronologically, they are:

1. *Starship Troopers*, 1997 (Best Novel Winner 1960). Things get off to a bad foot right off with *Starship Troopers*, which should be otherwise known as "The Film Most Likely to Set Hardcore Science Fiction Fans Into a Spasm." The Robert Heinlein book on which the movie was made is heavy on the philosophical matters of a young military volunteer figuring out what his responsibilities are to humanity; the movie, on the other hand, is about pretty actors blowing up truck-sized CGI bugs. Taken strictly on its own terms, the movie is actually a whole lot of mindless, campy fun. You can tell it's from the same brain as the people who wrote and directed *Robocop*, Ed Neumeier and Paul Verhoeven, respectively. But as an adaptation of the book, it's fairly atrocious.

2. *Dune*, 1984 (Best Novel Winner 1966). Frank Herbert's novel is a massive, intricately written tome about interstellar politics, religious war, planetary ecologies, and people spending a lot of time talking to themselves inside their heads. Director David Lynch wanted to honor all of this, but at the same time he also wanted add his own grotesque, leaning visual touches, from covering bad guy Baron Harkonnen in festering boils to including rocker Sting, loopy-eyed,

in the universe's most uncomfortable Speedo. The film was so hard to follow that when it was released, Universal Pictures sent theaters a flyer to hand out to filmgoers to explain what was going on. The movie was generally panned by critics, and later, Lynch himself distanced himself from it, saying "I started selling out on *Dune*. Looking back, it's no one's fault but my own." It's good he owns up to that.

3. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 2005 (Best Novel Winner, 2001)
Goblet of Fire was a somewhat controversial Best Novel winner among science fiction and fantasy fans (you will still hear many of them grumble that George R.R. Martin's *Storm of Swords* was denied its rightful prize) but one thing that is true is that the film adaptation of J.K. Rowling's fourth book in the Harry Potter series is easily the best of this trio. It's reasonably faithful to its source material, due likely to the involvement of Rowling herself in the production, and the awareness of the filmmakers that to mess with Harry, would be to risk a pummeling by millions of screaming pre-teens wielding thick hardcover books. As a film, it works nicely as well-put-together and was generally well-received. A big hit in theaters, of course, but the critics mostly liked it as well. Great art? No. Good movie? Sure.

Of course, each film has its partisans, but the general shakeup of things has one Best Novel derived film actually regarded as good. Is this surprising? Not really, remember that in general Hollywood has its ups and downs adapting most books into film (see page 75, Why the Movie Version of Your Favorite Sci-Fi Book Stinks Part I) (and in adapting plays into films, and adapting TV series, and adapting other films into remakes, etc.), and there's no reason why Hugo winners should escape this.

At the moment, several other Hugo Best Novel winners are reportedly in development as films, including Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, Dan Simmons' *Hyperion*, and Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*. Will these films—if they are made at all—live up to the award-winning status of their source material? Well, at the very least, we can hope so. Hoping is not too much to ask.

*Before anyone points it out, Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* won a "Retro Hugo" in 2004, because Hugos weren't awarded in 1954, the year the novel came out. A film version came in 1967, directed by François Truffaut. However, clearly, the movie came out while the book wasn't a Hugo winner, if that makes any sort of sense.

—August 7, 2008 Next 81, Previous 113

The Worst Science Fiction Movie of the Last Twelve Months

My overlords at AMC asked me if I plan to do a "best of" look at the science fiction movies of 2008 and I replied that of course I would, because if someone in my position *does not* do that sort of thing they come to haul him away to the re-education camps and that's just wrong. Santa doesn't deliver to re-education camps. Santa doesn't like re-education camps. Santa doesn't want to talk about it.)

But before I go there I want to go to the opposite end and talk about what I think was the worst science fiction movie of the last twelve months (you'll note I said "last twelve months" instead of "2008" because in fact the thing was released on Christmas Day 2007 and I'm sneaky like that). And which movie is that? If you guessed *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem*, give yourself a prize. Unless you actually watched it, in which case give yourself a hug.

Here's a brief synopsis (and accompanying **spoiler alert**). The movie starts off where the first *Alien vs. Predator* ended, with an Alien bursting out of a Predator on a ship out in space. This causes the ship to crash, unleashing a horde of aliens on the citizens of a peaceful Colorado town. But then a Predator shows up and starts fighting the aliens, though it's also not really above slaughtering a human or two when they get in the way. So the humans run like scared bunnies, to be picked off willy-nilly by aliens and/or predators. Eventually the whole town gets nuked by the government to contain the menace ("it's the only way to be sure"), and mostly everybody dies. The End.

Let me note that I knew going in the film was going to be bad. The first *AVP* movie was terrible. It was written and helmed by Paul W.S. Anderson, a director of such general hackery that I've actually instructed my film agent to demand I get an extra $2 million on the head attached to direct a movie based on one of my books. And as bad as that film was, it's a rare sequel of a terrible movie that's actually better than the original. But there's bad from which campy enjoyment can still be wrung (see *Speed Racer*) and there's cynically depressing bad, which this movie oozes.

First there's the technical badness. The Brothers Strause who directed it don't have much of a grip on pacing, editing or lighting. It's not a good thing when all the interesting stuff in your movie is impossible to see, and all the stuff you *can* see is impossible to find interesting. As much as I loathe Paul W.S. Anderson, at least he has a measure of technical know-how. The Strauses don't seem to have much of a clue.

To be fair, it doesn't help the Strauses that their script, from Shane Salerno who also graced us with *Armageddon*, is chock full of cardboard characters hastily given one or two identifying tics presumably so we'll be able to tell them apart once they get slaughtered. It doesn't work, and what you end up with is a *Friday the 13th*-like scenario where you can simply check off the people who are going to get it: Teenage girl who wants sex? Doomed. Genial husband? Doomed. Jerks who beat up the second lead? Doomed, doomed, doomed. Even the films Preda-

tor doesn't have a clue what he's do ng the thing comes to Earth to clear out the aliens and remove all trace of the r existence, but when some dude discovers him in the act, he leaves the skinned deboned corpse for the local sheriff to find To quote myself when this happened in the film *Brute*

Now if this had just been some generic science fict on flick all would have been fine -well, not *fine* but at least not offensive But the fact of the matter is that *AVP* comes out of two decent franchises that began with decent directors (Ridley Scott James Cameron David Fincher for *Alien* John McTiernan and Stephen Hopkins for *Predator* Now we have Anderson and the Strauses, who have not only made bad movies in their own right, but have desecrated source materia that's so vastly superior What's next for this franch se Uwe Boll? Both aliens and predators deserve better.

The good news s t at while this franch se went swirling down the tubes, science fiction movies in genera had a pretty decent year I'll talk more about that soon.

—December 11, 2008 Next 119, Previous 87

The Best (and Worst) Scifi Movies of the Year

It's almost 2009, folks. And if you've been asking yourself "Hey, when is Scalzi going to make his end of the year science fiction movie list?" then get ready, because that's what I'm going to do *right now*. If you weren't asking yourself that question, then uh, just go with it. Because ready or not, I present to you John Scalzi's 2008 list of science fiction movie superlatives.

The Most Satisfying Science Fiction Movie of the Year: *Cloverfield*
It was satisfying because it delivers on its promise, which is to give you a genuinely scary monster that destroys the crap out of a major U.S. city while horrifically killing off smug twenty somethings. Done and *done*, man. It's entirely possible to overthink *Cloverfield* — to see it as the final and complete absorption of 9/11 into popular culture, i.e. the movie that made it okay to beat up New York City again — but why would you do that when you're staring at chewed up neo-yuppies? It's all you need!

The Most Overrated Science Fiction Movie of the Year: *Iron Man*
Hey, shut up. I liked it just fine, and I appreciated that it isn't dumb. But it doesn't do anything revolutionary with the superhero genre. Its story is standard issue "origin tale," and I was never unaware that I was watching what is, in essence, a setup movie. People were cheering for this film because *Spider-Man 3* and *Superman Returns* were relative disappointments, and this looked like it could do better, and RDJ was bouncing back from Screw-Up Town with a big, shiny franchise movie. The presence of Jeff Bridges, Terrence Howard and Gwyneth Paltrow didn't hurt either. Is *Iron Man* a smart, fun superhero film that deserves its success? Totally. Should it be on Times 10 Best Movies the year!? Probably not.

The Movie I Most Wish Was Actually Science Fiction So I Could Put it on This List: *The Dark Knight*
It's the superhero (though not quite science fiction) movie that genuinely deserves its critical success, and I'm placing good odds it will get a Best Picture nomination, as well as a Best Supporting Actor nod for Heath Ledger and a host of technical kudos come Oscars season. That said, I wouldn't nominate this film as a model for all future comic book flicks. As *Iron Man* proves, not all superhero movies need to be so damn grim to work. What they need is the right story for the right characters. This one has it, plus a performance from Ledger that leaves no doubt as to what we'll be missing now that he's gone.

The Science Fiction Movie that Makes Me Feel the Worst for Delighting in its Complete and Utter Failure: *Speed Racer*
In some ways the Wachowskis had it coming for what they did to us with the last two *Matrix* chapters. But dude, it's *Speed Racer*. There are so many ways

this movie should have worked. I'm the right demographic to love *Speed Racer* and if you watch the movie with the sound off, I'll admit it looks really, really cool. But I'm just saying I wouldn't have minded if the movie was actually, you know, fun. I'm glad the Wachowskis' hubris has taken a blow—maybe they'll get their act together and make good movies from now on—but I just wish it didn't have to happen with such a beloved character.

The Best Science Fiction Movie of the Year: As you might have guessed, the year's best sci-fi is *WALL-E*, which also happens to be the best comedy of the year and, as the Oscars will very likely reflect, the best animated movie of the year. Indeed, it's entirely possible, as the Los Angeles Film Critics Association recently decreed, that *WALL-E* is actually just the best movie of the year. But since the cartoon's chances of making it onto the Best Picture Oscar ballot, let alone winning, are reasonably slim, we'll take what we can get. It's a shame too, because WALL-E himself is one of the best cinematic creations in years. A metallic descendant of Charlie Chaplin who gives, via his writers and animators, one of the most human performances I've ever seen. Both the technical and storytelling know-how required to make this movie work deserve all the recognition Hollywood can muster. I am constantly amazed—and sometimes a bit depressed—that Pixar is the only studio to actually understand that story and character are just as important to science fiction as explosions and special effects. But again, I'll happily take what I can get.

—December 18, 2008 *Next 45, Previous 117*

I've Got My Eyes on *Watchmen* and *Star Trek* in 2009

Yes, it's the new year. Come now. This shouldn't be a surprise. Every twelve months or so they spring another one on us. What you should really be pondering is which science fiction and speculative movies I'm interested in seeing during this new and now current calendar year. And to that end, I'll tell you, provided you understand this woefully incomplete list is in no particular order.

Watchmen: One of the reasons I'm interested in seeing it is because I'm not sure I'm going to be able to see it at all. The movie is at the center of a legal brawl between Warner Bros. and Fox over who owns the copyright. A recent ruling says Fox does, which bothers Warner seeing as it's the studio that put nine figures into the making and marketing of the thing. As de from the legal mumbo jumbo, I'm interested to see it because, like the graphic novel's writer Alan Moore, I'm not in the least bit convinced the material is actually possible to make into a coherent movie. But I'm hoping to be convinced, and I'm willing to offer some slack for this insanely ambitious project.

Star Trek: Basically, I want to see how much J.J. Abrams and his writers have messed with accepted *Star Trek* canon. Yes, I'm a *Trek* dork that way—but not militant about it, since let's face it. In order to make a TOS-era *Star Trek* origin story that doesn't look like cheap '60s TV they'd *have* to mess with it to some extent. Besides, Paramount already squeezed every possible bit of juice out of the last iteration with unbearably flaccid *Star Trek: Nemesis*. Now, per last week's column (see page 45), All John Scalzi Wants for Xmas Is Original SciFi, I'm not 100% convinced we need a new *Star Trek* at all, but since we have one at this point, coaxing outside the lines is what the universe needs.

Knowing: Nicolas Cage gets disturbingly accurate disaster predictions out of an elementary school time capsule, and it's pretty clear the end of the world is on its way. This strikes me as more generally speculative than straight up science fiction, but I can roll that way. And I'm sign up for seeing what director Alex Provas has to show me any day because I directed *The Crow* and *Dark City* and because unlike many angry angry purists I liked *I, Robot* just fine.

Avatar: James Cameron plays with 3D. I mean, really, people. How much more does a science fiction geek need to know before he says "sign me up"? Cameron is like the good writer director twin of George Lucas in that both have been instrumental in using science fiction to push filmmaking technology as far as it can possibly go. What makes Cameron the good twin instead of the evil goateed twin is that he can write interesting plots and characters and then direct humans to show actual emotion. Not everything Cameron

does works but even when he fails, he fails interestingly (see *The Abyss*). So I live on the faith that *Avatar* is going to be worth my time and money.

9: It's a freaky little animated movie produced by Tim Burton and Timur Bekmambetov (director of *Wanted*, and, rather more crucially, *Night Watch*, which is best described as *Toy Story* meets *Mad Max* or perhaps *The Nightmare Before the Apocalypse*. Every goth and steampunk devotee in the universe will see the trailer and explode with joy, to which I say, "Eeeeeeeu."

So those are the flicks I'm interested in. What am I anticipating, um, less? Well...

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen: Back in my day, toy commercials had the decency to be thirty seconds long. And on Saturday mornings! Between *Scooby Doo* and *Super Friends*! And they didn't have sequels! Damn kids! Get off my lawn!

Dragonball Evolution: Back in *my* day... oh, what's the use. But I just want to say, Chow Yun Fat? In this? God is *dead*, my friend.

2012: The Mayan Calendar runs out and it's the end of the world! Again! By my count, this is at least the third time director Roland Emmerich has tried to destroy the entire planet in his movies (others being *Independence Day* and *The Day After Tomorrow*). I'm not saying it's not fun to watch him squash us all like bugs, but I think maybe we should all get together and buy this guy, like, a stuffed animal or something.

—January 1, 2009 Next 7, Previous 45

Box Office Predictions for *Wolverine*, *Trek* and a Summer of SciFi

The summer movie season used to start on Memorial Day but even in a recession there's money to be made, and the studios are planning to make it. So now we kick off the first weekend in May with *X Men Origins: Wolverine*. How will it do? And how will sci-fi movies do this summer? Well, clearly I'm here to tell you.

Disclosure: I haven't seen any of these yet. These predictions here are based on previews, gossip, and my own mystical skills developed over nearly two decades as a film critic and commentator. Got it? Excellent.

May 1: ***X Men Origins: Wolverine:*** On the one hand it's focused on the most popular X Man out there and Hugh Jackman looks suitably badass. On the other hand, the last *X Men* movie was both goofy and disappointing, and I suspect this one's going to have to be really excellent to make up for it. The fact that the movie leaked on the Internet oddly enough might help combat that.
Box Office Prediction: Hit: but only a medium sized one.

May 8: ***Star Trek:*** Trekkies don't like to admit this, but save for the 1979 movie, all the *Star Trek* flicks are "programmers," moderately budgeted movies designed to draw in a moderately sized fanbase. This time around, though, Paramount is putting out all the stops to make the reboot a summer tentpole, and it shows in the A list production talent (director J. J. Abrams, writers Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci, as well as the A list marketing). The early reviews have been great, too.
Box Office Guess: Blockbuster: Easily over $200 million, $250 million is not out of the question and could even make it to $300 million if the geeks come back for seconds (and thirds).

May 21: ***Terminator Salvation:*** This one is in the same boat as *Wolverine*. Interest is high, but *Terminator 3* was nothing to write home about. I'm also personally wary of director McG, whose work on the *Charlie's Angels* movies does not exactly inspire confidence. That said, the previews for the movie have been *amazing*, so the young guys who will make up its core first weekend audience are all on board.
Box Office Guess: Blockbuster: It's going to have huge first weekend no matter what, and then the question is whether it has legs to top *Star Trek* over the whole summer.

June 5: ***Land of the Lost:*** Will Ferrell stars in the land of Sid and Marty Krofft. Inasmuch as it's based on a Saturday morning cartoon show that only people over the age of 35 remember, this has the potential to become this year's *Speed Racer*. On the other hand, it doesn't look like it's taking itself at all seriously and

that may be a plus.
Box Office Prediction: Hit: but just barely. It might drag itself over the $100 million mark.

June 24: ***Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen:*** The 2007 *Transformers* flick was, oddly, the least stupid Michael Bay flick yet and grossed almost $320 million. This one is coming back with the same talent in front of and behind the screen, so it won't take any rocket science for me to predict how it'll do.
Box Office Prediction: Blockbuster: but will it make as much as the first one? I'm going to say no, but it'll cruise to at least the $250 million mark no matter what.

July 24: ***G Force:*** Genetically engineered gerbils fight the forces of evil. Jerry Bruckheimer's attached to produce, and given his ability to deliver family-friendly action (the *National Treasure* series) and the inexplicable success of *Alvin & the Chipmunks*, it's possible that rodent secret agents are just the thing family audiences are screaming for.
Box Office Prediction: Hit: although if it gets to $200 million I may kill myself on general principle.

August 7: ***G.I. Joe: Rise of the Cobra:*** A line of popular children's toys becomes an action movie designed for geeks who never quite grew up. Hey, it worked for *Transformers*. That said, I question whether the affection for G.I. Joe is at the same level as Optimus Prime, or whether (and I can't believe I'm writing this) director Stephen Sommers has the same facility for large-scale toy-based action as Michael Bay.
Box Office Prediction: Dud: maybe the early August release will help by being a last gasp before kids head to school. But, I see this one going *thunk*.

—April 23, 2009 Next 15, Previous 55

Searching for a *Starship Troopers* in This Year's Hugo Nominees

It's that time of year again. The World Science Fiction Convention convenes today in Montreal, Quebec, and for the next five days sci-fi fans from all over the world are going to get super nerdy about their favorite books, movies, comics and other such things. The big event: The Hugo Awards, in which fans vote for their favorite novels, stories and movies. The winners get funky rocket shaped trophies and the knowledge that they're on the top plateau of geekdom for a year. You really can't beat that.

Last year this article looked at Hugo winning novels to see which of them had been made into movies (see page 115, Do Hugo Winning Novels Make Great Films?) and whether those movies were any good (*Starship Troopers*, anyone?). This year, we look at the current crop of nominees for Best Novel and try to guess what their chances are of making it onto the silver screen.

***Anathem*, by Neal Stephenson**

What's It About? On an Earth-like planet, a group of monkish scholars who are normally separated from the secular world for years at a time are suddenly called upon to solve a mysterious and planet-threatening conundrum.

Why It Would Make a Great Movie: The story crosses the entire globe and features a lot of action, including some that could be laden with groovy special effects. The main characters are young, which means that it could appeal to teens and the producers could hire unknowns in the main roles, keeping costs down.

Caveats: The book is 900 pages long, 200 pages of which establish the world, and much of the book concerns itself with intellectual pursuits. So any adaptation would remove huge chunks of story and might end up looking not at all like the actual book.

Other Data: Stephenson's previous works *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age* have been optioned, so he's a known name. *Anathem* landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list, which always gets Hollywood's attention.

Chance for a Movie Version: Possible.

***The Graveyard Book*, by Neil Gaiman**

What's It About? A young boy is raised by ghosts in a graveyard after his parents are murdered, and as he grows he must find his way into the real world.

Why It Would Make a Great Movie: It's a great concept, the story is aimed at younger readers so the movie would be family friendly, the cast of ghostly supporting characters means it could be peopled with all manner of fine British actors.

Caveat: Really, the only way this wouldn't make a great movie is if the screenwriter flubbed the screenplay.

Other Data: Neil Gaiman's stock in Hollywood is riding high with the success of *Coraline*, based on his Hugo award winning novella, and Gaiman's work

ing on several other movie projects, the book is already optioned with Oscar winner Neil Jordan *Interview With the Vampire* attached to direct

Chance for a Movie Version: Oh I'd say *pretty darn good*

***Little Brother*, by Cory Doctorow**

What's It About? After a terrorist attack on San Francisco a teenage hacker and his friends use their skills to confound an increasingly repressive U S government

Why It Would Make a Great Movie: Story is topical yet entertaining so the movie would qualify as a "smart thriller" which Hollywood likes, taps into the age-old "never trust anyone over 30" maxim that each generation of young people re-discovers.

Caveats: The book balances polemics, politics geekery and action, and that balance might be harder to achieve in a movie the possibility of "issue fatigue" regarding the trustworthiness of the U S government regardless of whether the government is, in fact, trustworthy).

Other Data: Another *New York Times* bestseller Doctorow is one of the masterminds behind *Boing Boing* and an all-around hip young intellectual, already optioned by producer Don Murphy (*From Hell, Transformers*

Chance for a Movie Version: Quite decent

***Saturn's Children*, by Charles Stross**

What's It About? After the extinction of humanity an android designed as a courtesan undertakes a mission that could spell the end of android civilization

Why It Would Make a Great Movie: Book is smart funny full of adventure and is not bounded by mere humans, main protagonist is "on screen" in almost every scene of the book and would be a brilliant vehicle for a young fearless actress.

Caveats: Very effects heavy most of the characters are robots that *don't* look like humans so could be expensive to make protagonist is really the only major human (lol) star so if the actress playing her can't pull it off, it'd be a *long* movie.

Other Data: Charles Stross currently holds the record for number of consecutive years with a Hugo nomination for Best Novel (this is his sixth), he's generally considered one of the leading lights of 21st century sci-fi

Chance for a Movie Version: Possible especially if the right actress discovers it.

There's a fifth nominee for Best Novel this year ***Zoe's Tale*** But since I wrote it, I'll recuse myself.

If I had to guess at which two have the best chance of coming to a theater near you, I'd go with *The Graveyard Book* and *Little Brother* Which incidentally, would be a double feature I'd love to see.

Which of these five books will actually win the Hugo for Best Novel? We'll find out Sunday night.

—August 6, 2009 Next 233, Previous 319

The Ten Worst SciFi Blockbusters of the '00s

Hey look, it's December 1 and not only are we coming to the end of another year but we're also coming to the end of another decade. Oh sure, the *nitpickers* will tell you the current decade doesn't actually turn over until 2011, but those people are no fun and we're ignoring them, so there.

The end of the decade means — you guessed it — end of the decade retrospectives. This week, I thought I'd kick it off with my votes for the Worst (Major, Science Fiction) Flicks of the Last Decade. For a movie to be eligible here, it has to fulfill three criteria:

1. Released between January 1, 2000 and right this very second.
2. Released to theaters in the U.S. (i.e. no straight to video or TV dreck)
3. One of the top 100 money grossers of its year. This last criterion, incidentally, disqualifies the entire Uwe Boll canon, for which I think we are all grateful.

What does this leave us with? My list, in alphabetical order:

***Aeon Flux* (2005):** An incomprehensible flick based on an MTV cartoon which was also incomprehensible but at least stylish. I suspect the entire pitch of this movie was five words: Charlize Theron. In skin tight leather. Doing what? Does it matter? Well, as it turns out, it does. Theron narrowly missed the award for the most embarrassing post-Oscar role with this one, thank you Halle Berry.

***Alien vs. Predator I & II* (2004, 2007):** It takes a special sort of director to make both aliens *and* predators boring, but Paul W.S. Anderson was just that sort of director, so well done him, I guess. At the very least he can take comfort in knowing he made the best *AvP* flick, as the sequel appears to have been written and directed by badgers (see page 11, The Worst Science Fiction Movie of the Last Twelve Months).

***The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004):** Overstuffed baroque silliness. Give director David Twohy $20 million and he'll make you *Pitch Black*. Give him $100 million, he'll make you *Chronicles of Riddick* (see page 5, The Ridiculousness of *Riddick*, or How Not to Make a Sci Fi Sequel. Lesson: With Twohy, less is a *lot* more. Rumor has it Twohy is planning a third Riddick flick. Let's hope he's making it on the cheap and that he pretends *Chronicles* never happened.

***The Core* (2003):** It's hard to top a Roland Emmerich disaster flick for bad science, but this one, in which the core of the earth has stopped spinning and we have to use nukes as a planetary defibrillator, manages to out-dumb both *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. It's so bad that scientists don't mind it because no one could possibly believe it models reality.

***Doom* (2005):** Beyond the movie's own fundamental badness, which is considerable *Doom* is a standin for the Worst SciFi Movie Sub-Genre of the Decade that being the video game tie in movie *Doom* is in fact typical of the genre Only tangentially related to the video game, substantially less well written and apparently assembled on the premise that gamers are too stupid to know a bad movie when they see it. Surprise! They're not.

***The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003):** See this is why steampunks can't have nice things Also proof that writer Alan Moore is absolutely correct when he says that Hollywood hasn't the slightest idea what to do with his work Moore's graphic novel series on which this is based is great this movie is a dank mess.

***Mission to Mars* (2000) / *Red Planet* (2000):** The year 2000 saw two competing Mars flicks which struggled fiercely for the title of Most Likely to Set Back Manned Exploration of Mars by 50 Years *Mission* seemed to have the struggle in hand with its "That Face on Mars is actually a face!" subplot but then *Red Planet* swooped in with its "Hey, there's an oxygen atmosphere on Mars and we totally didn't know!" bit This is why we shouldn't go to Mars It makes people stupid.

***Star Trek: Nemesis* (2003):** A movie so poorly made that it killed off Data arguably the most beloved character in the entire Next Generation cast and the audience simply couldn't muster the will to care That's impressive in its way like the world's largest bucket of spit is impressive in its way

***Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002):** *Phantom Menace* missed the list by a year but *Attack of the Clones* is bad enough on its own merits particularly the scenes in which Anakin and Padme attempt to romance each other, which are written in such a way as to suggest that George Lucas has never met a live girl, ever his previous marriage notwithstanding

***Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009):** Loud obnoxious stupid and surrounded by lots of cars and money This is the drunken frat boy of science fiction flicks.

—December 3, 2009 Next 129, Previous 249

Toys, Comics, Sequels, Remakes—Charting SciFi's Box Office Success in the '00s

As we wrap up the decade in science fiction movies, let's look at a list of the twenty most financially successful science fiction movies since 2000—as collated by IMDb Pro—to see what we can learn. Are these flicks especially creative? Do they have big stars? Are they director driven? Put simply, if you're making science fiction, what's your easiest path to ridiculous levels of success?

Easy: Toys, Comics, Sequels, Remakes. Out of the top twenty scifi movies of the last decade, 80 percent—that's sixteen out of twenty, if you don't want to do the math—are based on comics or toys and/or a sequel and/or a remake.

Let's go to the numbers, which represent domestic box office take:

1. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*: $402 million: Sequel, Toys

2. *Star Wars: Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*: ($380 million): Sequel

3. *Transformers*: ($319 million): Toys, Remake (if you count the '80s animated flick, and yeah, I do. Hey, it had Orson Welles in it. And Leonard Nimoy!)

4. *Iron Man:* ($318 million): Comics

5. *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones*: ($311 million): Sequel

6. *The Matrix Reloaded*: ($281 million): Sequel

7. *Star Trek*: ($250 million): Remake and Sequel, which is a nice trick if you think about it

8. *I Am Legend:* ($256 million): Remake

9. *X-Men: The Last Stand*: $234 million: Sequel, Comics

10. *War of the Worlds*: ($234 million): Remake

So the entire top ten science movies of the 2000s were Toys, Comics, Sequels, Remakes. What about the next ten?

11. *Signs:* ($228 million): Original

12. *Wall*E:* ($224 million): Original

13. *X2: X-Men United*: ($215 million): Sequel, Comic

14. *Superman Returns* ($200 million) Sequel, and also sort of Remake in that it follows *Superman II*, thus snapping off the storylines of *Supermans III* and *IV*

15. *Monsters vs Aliens* ($198 million) Original (but playing off all sorts of established scifi movie tropes)

16. *Men in Black II* ($190 million) Sequel, Comics

17. *The Day After Tomorrow* ($187 million) Original

18. *Jurassic Park III:* ($181 million): Sequel

19. *Planet of the Apes* ($180 million) Remake

20. *X-Men Origin: Wolverine* ($180) Sequel, (well, Prequel but actively schlepping off the established *X Men* brand) Comics

IMDb Pro's list chooses not to include any of the *Spider-Man* or *Batman* movies, but if they were there, they wouldn't change its overall composition: as they are all remakes, sequels or based on comics.

Using this as a guidepost, one thing is clear: If Michael Bay ever makes *Transformers III: The Rise of ROM the Spaceknight*, it will be THE MOST SUCCESSFUL SCIENCE FICTION MOVIE EVER. At which point, mind you, global death by asteroid might not be a bad thing.

What does this list and its oversaturation of Toys, Comics, Sequels and Remakes tell us? Basically, it tells us what we should have already known, which is that Hollywood, despite its reputation of being a city of crazy liberals, is in fact horribly conservative with its business: if something is successful, the thing to do is make more of it. If it was successful once, redo it so it will be successful again. If it's a huge success in another medium, leverage that success into another medium. And so on.

To be clear, movie folks aren't the only ones who do this (said the fellow who wrote three sequels to his first novel, and works on a TV series based on other TV series themselves based on a movie). But on the other hand, movies do especially seem to be in its grip. Transformer toys are more than a quarter century old; *Star Wars* is 32 years old; *Star Trek* a decade older than that. The 1954 novel *I Am Legend* was first made into a movie in 1964. Iron Man made his first appearance in 1963, as did the X-Men. And as for *War of the Worlds*: it was a remake of a 50 year old movie based on a novel that came out 111 years ago now. Science fiction is the genre of the future, but on the business end, it's very much rooted in the past.

Which really is a shame. I don't have a beef with toys, comics, remakes and sequels. I've seen every movie in the Top 20 up there, you know. But I do hope that in the next decade we see more new work at the top of the sixth charts. This might be a self correcting problem. There are only so many sequels and

remakes you can do, and all the easy pickings for toys and comics have been made. Hollywood might have to start pushing original material simply because it has no choice.

—December 10, 2009 Next 133, Previous 127

The Winners and Losers of '00s SciFi Movies

As we continue our look through a decade of science fiction, it becomes evident that in the past ten years there have emerged winners and losers in the field. Who and what are they? Hey, I'm getting to that!

WINNER: Uwe Boll. Yes, I know. He's arguably the worst director in the history of history, a pure product of Germany's insane film-oriented tax shelters and the man who put the umlaut in the word "suck." But you know what? He's managed to make movies all decade long, often with big stars who should have known better. I would rather drag my tongue across 18 yards of feculent glass shards than ever watch another Boll movie, but you can't say he didn't win the decade. Well done, Uwe. Stay the hell away from me.

LOSER: Video Game Movies. Aside from being inflicted with the above-mentioned Boll, the genre was flick after flick of unmitigated fail. You may recall *Doom* making my "Ten Worst of the Decade" (see page 127: The Ten Worst SciFi Blockbusters of the '00s) list, but to be fair to *Doom*, it could have been swapped out with *Alone in the Dark*, or *Hitman*, or *Street Fighter*, or any of the *Resident Evils*. The one hope for the genre, the *Halo* movie, was squat-tainted before it ever got out of the gate, although we did get *District 9* out of it, so it wasn't all bad. People seem to be holding out hope for *Prince of Persia*. Yeah, I've seen the trailer. Keep hoping, folks.

WINNER: Will Smith. Four sci-fi movies in the '00s (*Men in Black II*, *I, Robot*, *I Am Legend*, *Hancock*) and $820 million in domestic box office. Can't argue with that. To be sure, his other movies did pretty well too (except for *Seven Pounds*, because, you know, cheer up, dude) and he coupled Oscar nods he got in there didn't hurt. But we all know that at the end of the day, it's his sci-fi work that's the engine of his success. From the geek nation, Will: You're welcome.

LOSER: Vin Diesel. Which hurts me to say because, I admit, I have a totally hetero, man-crush on the dude. So bald. So gravely-voiced. So manly. Shut up, I totally *am* straight. Be that as it may, Diesel's once-prominent domination of the decade's box office got a swift pair of sucker punches from *The Chronicles of Riddick* and *Babylon A.D.* While I hope the next decade is kinder to him, we can only weep at what might have been.

WINNER: J.J. Abrams. I took it mostly on faith about the science in this year's *Star Trek* (see page 24: "Education Is Not the Answer for *Star Trek*'s Bad Science"), being somewhere between "bad" and "mentally deficient lemurs are smarter than this," but you know what? The *Star Trek* franchise was so saddled with such overexhausted mediocrity that reviving it—and making it fun again—qualifies as a minor miracle. So props where they're deserved. Also, *Cloverfield*? Most awesome monster movie of the decade that wasn't named *The Host*. Oh, and *Alias* and *Lost* were OK, too.

LOSER: George Lucas and the Wachowski Brothers. Both used the decade to grind their franchises into befuddled irrelevance. To be sure, Lucas got a head start with *Phantom Menace* in '99, but the other two "prequel" movies equally bankrupted the *Star Wars* series's fan goodwill even as they raked in the cash. As for the Wachowskis: well, I give them credit for trying to make something deep out of *The Matrix* sequels. But just because Cornel West says what you're doing is deep does it mean it *is*. On the other hand, I think their script for *V for Vendetta* was terrific and apparently no one else in the world agrees with me, so what do I know.

WINNER: The End of the World as We Know It. Roland Emmerich owned this category with *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012*, but let's remember to give a shout out to *War of the Worlds*, *Knowing*, *Cloverfield* and, yes, *The Core*. Some folks would argue these represent our working out feelings about 9/11, imminent environmental collapse and general existential malaise. Well, fine, but I think they were also about watching everything go kerplooey with nifty perfect CGI.

LOSER: Humorous Live Action Science Fiction. I mean *intentionally* funny. Stop talking to me about *G.I. Joe*. Seriously, what have we got for the decade? *The Stepford Wives*? *Evolution*? *The Adventure of Pluto Nash*? Even *Men in Black II* wasn't all that. If it wasn't for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* we'd have nothing, and that's not even ha-ha comedy, it's Huh, now I have to *think* comedy. Fortunately, we did have:

WINNER: Animated Science Fiction. *WALL-E*. One of the best movies of the decade. *The Incredibles*. Ditto *Lilo & Stitch*. *Robots*, *Monsters vs. Aliens*, all pretty decent little flicks. Yes, there's also *Treasure Planet*, *Space Chimps* and *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, but they can't all be gems. I'd like to see more humor in scifi outside of animation, but there's no argument that the last decade was a golden age for scifi animation.

LOSER: Science Fiction Based on Books. Science fiction movies based on comics? You got tons (see last week's column, page 129). Toys, Comics, Sequels, Remakes, Charting SciFi's Box Office Success in the '00s? But based on actual novels? Well, *I, Robot* and *War of the Worlds* were hits, *Jumper* did OK, *Children of Men* was brilliant but underseen, and after that it gets kind of... meh. I think Hollywood has gotten out of the habit of looking at literature of science fiction, which is a shame because there are some excellent works out there perfect for theatrical adaptation, and I say that *without any self interest whatsoever*.

—December 17, 2009 Next 135, Previous 129

The Most Memorable SciFi Movies of the Year

I've been talking about the decade in retrospect all (see page 127, The Ten Worst SciFi Blockbusters of the '00s; month (see page 129, Toys, Comics, Sequels, Remakes — Charting SciFi's Box Office Success in the '00s; long (see page 133, The Winners and Losers of '00s SciFi Movies — so for one week and one week only(!) I'm going to leave the rest of the decade to fend for itself and talk instead about the highlights of 2009. These are the sci-fi movies I'll remember for good or ill. In no particular order:

Avatar: Wow. I could watch this movie every day. In order for this superexpensive (almost all CGI geekfest to succeed, James Cameron had to knock the cinematic ball out of the park — and that's just what he did. On the one hand, this should come as no surprise: the dude's been knocking the ball out of the park visually and technically since *Aliens*. On the other: when you're as ambitious and spend as much money as Cameron is and does, sooner or later everyone expects you to face-plant. Well, haters, save your Schadenfreude and grind your teeth in anguish as Cameron delivers spectacularly again.

The question for *Avatar* now isn't whether it will be a hit, but whether Cameron's ambitions with the movie will be rewarded with Oscar nominations. I'm on record saying I didn't expect a sci-fi movie to make the Best Picture slate this year (see page 239, Oscar Bait: Low-Budget SciFi and 3D Longevity — It's the Return of John Scalzi's Mailbag), but I left myself an out by saying I hadn't seen *Avatar* yet. I'm glad I did, because *Avatar* is exactly the sort of technically rhapsodic act that makes it an easy pick for Best Picture, and Cameron himself a good shot for Best Director. Will it win? I don't know, but if it's not on the Oscar slate there's something very wrong.

Moon: What might kill *Avatar*'s chance at winning Best Picture is that its story is merely serviceable, typical of Cameron, but a fatality nonetheless. For people who want actual storytelling in their sci-fi, the best movie of the year is *Moon*, a tiny flick made for about one percent of *Avatar*'s budget. *Moon* dwells on the subject of identity and loss, and is startlingly effective in its way, in no small part because of the performance of Sam Rockwell as the universe's loneliest astronaut.

Moon and *Avatar* are fine examples of how science fiction got done in 2009 on both extremes of the budget-making spectrum: one tiny, intimate and about character and story; the other huge, crowd-pleasing and about saturating your eyeballs to the point of overload. In many ways, they're complementary experiences. Which is better is a matter of personal taste. But each in its way is as good as sci-fi got this year.

District 9: Somewhere in the middle of the above extremes falls this movie about a forced alien-relocation project gone deeply awry, shot in *faux* docu-

mentary style and by turns grubby darkly humorous and gleefully gruesome Let me take a moment to note as a moviegoer that in these days of overly calculated PG-13 filmmaking it's nice to see a smart scifi movie that's unapologetically rated R. In the end I think *District 9* has been slightly overrated the thing falls apart in the third act but it's still a kick and an excellent feature debut by director Neill Blomkamp.

Watchmen: This was the biggest disappointment of the year. not because it isn't good it's fine but because I think it missed being brilliant by a tiny margin, and that margin involves about six beats that could have been snipped out of nearly every scene For the want of tighter editing, we would have had an undisputed classic both in the science-fiction and the superhero genres A genuine pity.

Star Trek: In many ways this movie represents the state of modern cinema. both as an art and as a business It's a clean fast competent installation of a franchise and genre so deeply ingrained in the audiences neural pathways that it requires almost no effort to enjoy, served up with a script that hits the audiences pleasure buttons and does it require it to think This is not a criticism, it's an observation.

I have to admit that I'm simply fascinated with *Star Trek* this particular movie, I mean because it is so capable in every way it has to be (and not in any way it doesn't—yes I'm switching about red matter) I've watched and enjoyed the movie several times but I'm not convinced there's anything under its surface And that's the state of cinematic art in 2009.

—December 24, 2009 Next 137, Previous 133

The Best SciFi Movies of the '00s

And now we've come to it. The last day of the year and also the last day of the decade, and with that turn comes my list of the Best Science Fiction Movies of the '00s.

As with my list of the Worst Movies of the '00s (see page 127, The Ten Worst SciFi Blockbusters of the '00s), I'm making some eligibility requirements. The movie must be:

1. Released between January 1, 2000 and right this very second,
2. Released to theaters in the U.S. (i.e., no straight to video or TV movies);
3. One of the top 100 money grossers of its year.

This last one may be controversial, as it snips off at least a couple movies which might otherwise deserve consideration, most notably *Primer* and *Moon*. But I think being seen matters. You're free to disagree. But if it really bothers you, remember I gave *Moon* some love last week (see page 135, The Most Memorable SciFi Movies of the Year).

And with that, here is my list, in alphabetical order:

28 Days Later **(2002):** This was a primary spur for the decade's fascination with the undead, and offered two critical innovations to zombie lore. First, a "viral" explanation (which makes it science fiction), and second, the feral "fast zombie" as a counterpart to the classic shambler. Also, the movie was brilliantly done for totally cheap ($8 million), which showed that great scifi doesn't always need hundreds of millions of dollars to be realized.

Avatar **(2009):** But then again, sometimes scifi *does* need hundreds of millions of dollars, and no one makes those millions go further than James Cameron. This flick leaps into this essential list on the strength of its visual design and technical accomplishment, and sets the bar for big budget scifi so high that filmmakers will spend the next decade trying to clear it.

Blade II **(2002):** Keep *Spider-Man 2* and *Iron Man*—for me, this was the essential live action comic book adaptation. Why? Guillermo del Toro gives it a grubby, gothic visual tone that announced his talent to mainstream audiences, paving the way for *Hellboy*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, and his involvement in the upcoming Hobbit movies. It's also, with *28 Days Later*, the best horror scifi mash-up of the decade.

Cloverfield **(2008):** *Star Trek* was actually J.J. Abrams's second most successful genre reinvention, the first which he produced, finally gives New York City the Godzilla it deserves. For me, this movie about making it through the night while being chased by your demons, one of which is the size of the Chrysler

Building has more staying power than *Star Trek*. It's also like *28 Days Later*, a testament to what you can do with movies even on a budget as low as $25 million.

***District 9* (2009):** This is the shakiest entry on the list for me, and not just because it follows the "handheld filming ethos." It's shaky because a lot of its appeal is that it came out of nowhere and was both smart and darkly funny, which made it an excellent antidote to the toxic shock stup dity of so many of 2009's summer blockbusters. I do wonder if its appeal will survive separated out from the *Transformers* and *G.I. Joes* of the world, but I'm glad it was there when it was.

***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004):** Put a gun to my head and I'd say that this was the best sci-fi movie of the decade (note: please don't put a gun to my head). It does what sci-fi should do—take your perceptions of reality and plausibility and upend them, leaving you breathless with a buzzing brain. That it also has a poignant love story and two of the best acting performances of the decade (from Kate Winslet and Jim Carrey) doesn't hurt either.

***The Incredibles* (2004):** Or if you like, swap this with *WALL-E* (2008)—both deserve a spot on the list and both are from Pixar. *The Incredibles* to my mind is the definitive commentary on the superhero genre—the movie that does what *Watchmen* wanted to do, and still manages to be a comedy. *WALL-E* on the other hand offers the best physical comedy of the decade with a smidgen of social satire and environmental consciousness. That two of the best sci-fis were also meant to be seen by families seals the deal for their significance. Rock on, Pixar.

***Minority Report* (2002):** Steven Spielberg had three impressive if flawed sci-fi movies in the last ten years: *A.I.*, *War of the Worlds* and *Minority Report*. (Let us not speak of *Indiana Jones*.) And of the three, this one was the most genuinely impressive: a dark and cynical look at technology and how blind faith in it leads to moral dead ends. People are so used to Spielberg being good at what he does that we take him for granted; take another look at this one and see more than you saw the first time.

***Serenity* (2005):** *Serenity* fans don't like acknowledging that their favorite sci-fi of the last decade was an abject failure (it just barely squeaked onto this list as the 100th most successful movie of 2005). The reason they don't like acknowledging its failure is because there's no reason it should have failed. This is fun stuff, full of action, great characters and dialog and interesting moral quandaries. *Serenity* stands as a testament to the fact that life isn't fair, and you make the best of what you get out of it.

***V for Vendetta* (2006):** My vote for the Most Underrated Science Fiction Movie of the Decade (this is the Wachowski Brothers' best script of the decade, and the

best Alan Moore adaptation – the author's outright contempt for Thatcherite England is successfully ported into our own turbulent political era – making for a dystopic movie that I think people will eventually see as wholly representative of the frustrations and paranoia of its era. I could be wrong. Let's check back in a decade.

Have a happy and safe New Year's Eve, folks. See you on the other side of the decade.

—December 31, 2009 *Next 141, Previous 135*

Do the Producers Guild Nominations Foretell Oscar Bids for SciFi?

It appears that at least some of the folks who read this column are closely following the awards and nominations that come out in advance of the Oscars. The following question popped up in my inbox:

> The Producers Guild of America nominated three science fiction films for their Best Picture award. Do you think that will mean anything for the Oscars?

My answer: It might.

For those of you not keeping up with awards stuff, the three scifi movies the Producers Guild nominated are *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Star Trek*. *Avatar* is no real surprise. It's been nominated for four Golden Globes (including Best Picture Drama) and it's going to be a very real contender for the Academy Awards. *District 9* and *Star Trek*, on the other hand, were enough of a surprise that *The Los Angeles Times* headlined the strength of the genre in its article on the matter (the non-genre nominees: *An Education*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Inglourious Basterds*, *Invictus*, *Precious*, *Up* and *Up in the Air*).

The presence of three science fiction movies in the mix is significant in that the Producers Guild has not been notably friendly to scifi before and because, as with the Academy Awards, it expanded its Best Picture category this year from five movies to ten. So both of these add some real interest into the mix when prognosticating about how the genre will do come Oscar time. Many of the folks in the Producers Guild are also in the Academy, and it seems unlikely that their Best Picture votes would change substantially. So I think the chances of *District 9* and *Star Trek* showing up on the Oscar Best Picture ballot have increased a bit.

One thing I think science fiction fans should keep in mind, however, is that these movies may have been nominated *in spite* of being science fiction, or at the very least their scifi aspects may have been neutral factors while other factors about their production were more significant in the nomination calculus. For example, all three were big box office hits, and having a mix of commercially-successful yet critically acceptable movies to go with lesser seen but critically loved films allows for just the sort of cinematic spread that opening up the Best Picture lists was supposed to do. That they happened to be scifi might have been aside the point.

Beyond this, from a movie producer's point of view, *Avatar* gets points for being the new technical state of art, *Star Trek* gets a nod because reviving a famed and formerly profitable franchise is harder than it looks, and *District 9* is an example of innovation coming cheap and from out of nowhere (for the values of "out of nowhere" which include Peter Jackson). None of this is necessarily about the movies' subject matter directly.

The other matter to consider is that although I think *District 9* and *Star Trek*'s chances to get on the Academy Best Picture slate have gone up a bit, producers aren't the only members of the Academy, of which everyone gets a vote for Best Picture. Consider that the largest branch of the Academy is the actors branch, and while all three of these sci-fi flicks have things to recommend them, their performances aren't what stands out most. That might be a relevant factor when the actors make their Best Picture picks. If *District 9* and *Star Trek* don't eventually make the final Oscar cut, my bet is that it will have been the actors who will have denied them.

Ironically, the one sci-fi flick with a really impressive acting performance, *Moon*, has been basically abandoned by its distributor when it comes to Oscar campaigning. It's possible that Sam Rockwell's turn as a lonely lunar resident might still get love, but the fact is there are a lot of impressive acting performances out there, and having one's studio doing some marketing come nomination time will make a difference when people are sitting with their pens trying to remember what they liked in the last year. So I suspect *Moon* is going to miss out. Sorry, Sam; you deserve better.

Which is not to say sci-fi fans shouldn't have cause to celebrate. Three genre flicks landing on the nomination slate for a significant Hollywood award is an accomplishment no matter how it gets done, and if being a sci-fi movie is actually still a detriment to being considered for Best Picture, the fact that three managed to do it nonetheless is an achievement to savor. We'll see what it means for the Oscars soon enough, in any event.

—January 7, 2010 *Next 191, Previous 137*

Five Thoughts on This Year's SciFi Oscar Nominations

Well! Tuesday was not a bad day for scifi. *Avatar* racked up nine Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director, *District 9* found its way to four nominations including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay, and *Star Trek* also picked up four nods in technical categories. Oh, and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* got one, in Sound Mixing, to go with its seven Razzie nominations. So that's nice, too.

Some thoughts on all of this:

1. This year breaks a 27-year drought for science fiction in the Best Picture category, dating back to 1982 when *E.T.* was nominated. *Avatar* and *District 9* are the fourth and fifth movies in the genre to be nominated, after *E.T.*, *Star Wars* in 1977 and *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971. It's also the first time two scifi flicks have been nominated for Best Picture in the same year, so no matter how you slice it 2009 will go down as a watershed year in the genre.

2. While I had really no doubt *Avatar* would be in Best Picture contention, I was initially skeptical *District 9* would hit the list. So to have it show up is a nice thing indeed, although its screenplay nomination both floors me and is a welcome surprise. Folks who wish to snipe will note it's likely there because the Best Picture field expanded to ten slots this year, to which I would say first, obviously, and second, so what. If *The Blind Side* can be on the list, certainly *District 9* deserves a slot.

3. *Trek* fans may be miffed that the movie was nominated only in technical categories, but to my mind that's pretty much a fair outcome. I think it got on the Producers Guild Awards slate for what it did (probably) revive a dormant franchise, more than for what it was (a good and fun but not great movie). And if these fans are miffed now, wait until *Avatar* snatches all the technical Oscars, which it will almost certainly do.

4. Yes, yes, you say. But do either *Avatar* or *District 9* have a chance to win? I'll start off with *District 9*: No chance at all. First, it was one of the five movies on the slate to not get a Best Director nod. The last time a movie won Best Picture when the director wasn't nominated was 20 years ago with *Driving Miss Daisy*. It's not likely to happen again this year, and it's especially not likely to happen with a scifi movie. Likewise, while Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell should be thrilled with their screenplay nom, they probably don't need to work too hard on their acceptance speeches. Hey, it's just an honor to be nominated.

5. *Avatar*. Well, now I believe it's going to clean up in the technical categories because, as it happens, the movie is an actual technical wonder. Plus, any movie

that can drag in $2 bill on worldwide and still have people coming back into theaters is hard to ignore. Aside from anything else *Avatar*'s done, it's reminded audiences that there really is something to be said for seeing a movie in a theater with other people.

That said, *Avatar* has disadvantages in its struggle to emerge as top flick. First, it has no acting nominations, and actors are the largest group of voters in the Academy — roughly 20% *Avatar* also lacks a screenplay nod, and it's relatively unusual for a movie to win Best Picture without one—although the last one which did was *Titanic*, so that's something to consider. Also, sci-fi's track record in the Best Picture slot is 0-3 so far, and the nearly three decade gap between *E.T.* and *Avatar* suggests that the Academy's bias against the genre has not exactly abated. Finally, the other front runners this year are a decent crop of movies. These will all work against *Avatar* down the stretch.

So what's my final estimate at *Avatar*'s chances? Of the ten, it's in my top three along with *Hurt Locker* and *Inglourious Basterds*. If you put a gun to my head I'd flip a coin between *Avatar* and *Basterds*. Yes, at the moment I think we're that close to having the first sci-fi Best Picture. But we'll have to wait a month to see how it shakes out.

—February 4, 2010 Next 257, Previous 253

Weighing the Oscar Odds for This Year's SciFi Favorites

The Oscars are on Sunday and the producers of the show are expecting a big viewership thanks to an influx of fans tuning in to see how *Avatar* and *District 9* fare. My suspicion is that this will be the biggest Oscar ceremony in a long time. Will science fiction fans have reason to celebrate?

First, *District 9* fans remember that it's an honor to be nominated. When the nominees were announced, I opined that it had no chance to win Best Picture and was a very distant candidate for Adapted Screenplay. In the weeks since that prediction, there has been no measurable momentum for the movie. It's also up for Editing and Visual Effects; the latter's pretty much locked up by *Avatar* and, in the former category, it's competing against *Avatar*, *Precious*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Inglourious Basterds*. Not gonna happen. Look at it this way: no matter how you slice it, Neill Blomkamp has had a heck of a run, and there's no doubt that *District 9* is a classic.

If sci-fi fans want to feel bad for a movie, it should be *Star Trek*, which is going to get stomped in the Visual Effects and Sound Editing categories. But Trekkies can hold out hope in the Makeup race, where the competition is a little seen Italian film, *Il Divo*, and *Young Victoria*. Nominee Barney Burman's part of a makeup dynasty; his father, Thomas, was nominated for *Scrooged*. (You might ask, why isn't *Avatar* up for Makeup? Lots of actors were blue, and the way through. Answer: because their blueness was computer generated.)

I think *Avatar*'s going to rampage through the technical categories. It will be an upset if it doesn't win Sound, Sound Editing, and Visual Effects. Likewise, it's a strong contender for Editing. A bit of trivia: Cameron's first Oscar was in this category, as he co-edited *Titanic*. Likewise, Art Direction and Cinematography. I've been assured by people who know more than I do that the technical aspects of *Avatar*'s camerawork are pretty sophisticated. It's also a strong contender for Original Score, but I want that to go to *Up*'s Michael Giacchino.

That leaves two categories: Director and Picture. All signs point to Cameron not winning Director. The buzz is for *The Hurt Locker*'s Kathryn Bigelow, who recently won an award from the Directors Guild of America. It should be noted that even Cameron has been campaigning for her, noting on MTV and in other places that he thinks it's her year. The movie is undeniably worthy.

Avatar's such an excellent bet to win top picture, it's hard to ignore a film that brings in $700 million domestically and $2.5 billion internationally. Some of its major competitors – *Up in the Air*, *Precious*, and one of my favorites, *Inglourious Basterds* – seem to have already peaked in terms of buzz. *The Hurt Locker* suffered a late-game hit when one of its producers sent an e-mail to the Academy begging for votes and denigrating *Avatar* – a no-no in the Oscar rule book. (These things matter.)

There's a very good chance that by the end of Sunday night the world will have its first sci-fi Best Picture winner. What will that mean for the genre? If it wins, my next column will cover that very topic.

—March 4, 2010 Next 147, Previous 67

So Why Did *The Hurt Locker* Beat Out *Avatar* for Best Picture?

Well, this wasn't an entirely unexpected e-mail from a reader

> You said last week that if *Avatar* won Best Picture at the Academy Awards that would tell us what that means. It didn't win. So what does THAT mean?

In one very practical sense, it means that the overall better movie—or at least the more well-rounded of the two in terms of Oscar nominations—won. *Avatar* and *Hurt Locker* had the same number of Oscar noms, but what *Hurt Locker* had that *Avatar* didn't were acting and screenplay nominations to complement their technical ones. I noted early on that this fact would be a disadvantage to *Avatar*, and it certainly seems to have played out that way. I think either consciously or subconsciously Academy voters saw the wider breadth of nomination categories for *Hurt Locker* and—to the extent that the race came down to being a choice between *Hurt Locker* and *Avatar*—went for the movie with the wider range. But there were other factors at play here as well.

It takes nothing away from Kathryn Bigelow's accomplishments as a director (which, after Sunday night, had been underrated for years) and the ample qualities of *Hurt Locker* to note that for some (not many, Academy members, the opportunity to give top awards to a female-helmed flick was an important one. To put it as bluntly as possible: If the Academy wouldn't do it this year, when there was no question both film and director were deserving, when would they?

Still, should such fans feel as if they've been robbed? Well, this fan feels perfectly fine with it. First of all, *the Hurt Locker* is eminently worthy of the Best Picture award, which matters. It's one thing for *Avatar* or say *District 9* to lose to one of the most acclaimed movies of the last decade. It would have been another thing if it had lost to, say, *the Blind Side*, which, though it's a nice story, isn't, in my opinion, the overall accomplishment that *Avatar* or *District 9* turned out to be.

Second, science fiction fans should be honest with themselves and admit that *Avatar* was really only middling when it came to its story, which, while effective, was not exactly what you'd call wildly original. I think this was wholly intentional on the part of James Cameron, having invested so much money and effort pushing the technology of filmmaking, I think he played it safe on the script to make sure he got butts in seats. The commercial wisdom of this choice is not much in doubt (please see the $2.5 billion worldwide gross to date), but when it came to awards time, it left the film in a vulnerable spot.

Third, James Cameron spent the last few weeks more or less proclaiming that he thought it was Bigelow's year, and that if *Avatar* won on its technical merits that that would be fine with him, because hey, he's got his Oscars already.

Now, we can debate whether he was doing that because he already sensed the movie was going to come up short on the Best Picture front or because he was rallying behind Bigelow, whom he respects as a filmmaker and colleague, and to whom he used to be married. But either way it's like The King of the World is going around publicly saying, "Hey, I'm good, give this to someone else." I'm not sure anyone should be too put out when things end up going that way.

I think another reason Cameron was comfortable with the Oscar slipping past *Avatar* is because he remembers something that other people sometimes forget, which is that Oscar isn't the final arbiter of a movie's significance, especially when it comes to science fiction. *Star Wars* lost the Best Picture Oscar to *Annie Hall*. *E.T.* was defeated by *Gandhi*. *2001* wasn't even nominated for Best Picture in its year, but it would like to suggest that the winner that year (*Oliver!*) has had more of an impact on our culture you'll get, at best, polite blank stares.

The Hurt Locker is undoubtedly deserving of the Best Picture Oscar. And sure, it would have been great for science fiction to get the mainstream affirmation that comes from Best Picture status. But in the long run, for *Avatar*, and for Cameron, the award would have simply been a bonus. I suspect he knows a quarter century from now, which movie is likely to have made a larger impact on the culture, and on filmmaking in general. It's not the one that just won Best Picture.

—March 11, 2010 *Next 325, Previous 145*

Science Fiction Summer 2010 (Or Lack Thereof)

Summer is coming, here in the northern hemisphere at least—it's that whole "tilt of the axis of the planet" thing—and with it comes the Summer Blockbuster Season, in which Hollywood rolls out its big guns in an attempt to lure you and your money into the movie theater to see stars and explosions and lasers and what not. So it's perhaps not entirely surprising that the other day I was asked which scifi films I was looking forward to this summer.

What was surprising—at least to the person who asked me the question—was my answer. "*What* science fiction films?" Because between the first of May to Labor Day, there's maybe one science fiction film coming out each month. Oh sure, there's lot of other stuff science fiction fans are going to want to see—comic book movies, fantasy movies, animated films, a couple of horror flicks thrown in there—but after a solid science fictional summer in '09 with *Star Trek* and *Transformers* and *District 9*, this summer is looking maybe a little more mellow.

Let's look at what we've got on the (still tentative) lineup, and how I think they're going to fare in the world.

Iron Man 2: (May 7) This is a comic book movie first and foremost but code shares with science fiction because, hey, look at the suit. I wasn't the biggest fan of the first film, but I *did* like it—it was smart and funny and Robert Downey, Jr. was exactly the right guy to play Tony Stark. This time around the canny casting continues with Mickey Rourke as Stark's nemesis, and at the end of the day I can't imagine this film blowing the good will and enthusiasm the first film generated.
Prediction: Iron Man fights with *Shrek*, Buzz Lightyear and the *Twilight* vampires for biggest hit of the summer.

Splice: (June 4) Adrian Brody and Sarah Polley star as two genetic scientists who take playing God too far when they introduce human DNA into their experiments. Dr. Moreau would be proud. Or maybe not. It's ones been out to a film festival or two and the early buzz on it is pretty good.
Prediction: Modestly successful, unless science fiction starved fans push it over the top.

Despicable Me: (July 9) Steve Carell plays an animated James Bond style villain, complete with an host of freeze rays, death rays, and numerous but dim henchmen, whose plans for global domination are scrambled when he becomes guardian of three orphaned girls. Clearly this is a case of Child Protective Services falling down on the job.
Prediction: The presence of Carell in a family-friendly animated film means this will do pretty well, especially when the 3D ticket boost is factored in. But

with the Shrek and Toy Story sequels out there, the makers of *Despicable Me* shouldn't hope to be the number one animated film of the summer.

Predators: July 9. Remember that *Predator* sequel and those two *Alien vs. Predator* flicks? Yeah, well, the filmmakers of this one kind of hope you *don't* and will instead consider this flick the true heir to the *Predator* crown. In this one a bunch of various bad asses, including, incongruously, Adrian Brody and Topher Grace, are transported to another planet to be prey for everyone's favorite, semi-invisible blade wielding alien hunters. On one hand, Robert Rodriguez is producing, and he's both a fan of the original and smarter than the average filmmaker when it comes to action and science fiction. On the other hand, if there was ever an underperforming franchise, this is it.
Prediction: Big opening weekend thanks to the fanboys—but whether it has legs after that remains to be seen.

Inception: July 16. While his fans are waiting for Christopher Nolan to swing back around to the *Batman* franchise, the director keeps them busy with this very trippy looking science fiction thriller starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a corporate spy who can enter dreams to look for information. So, basically the 1980s flick *Dreamscape* plus a whole lot of money and style, and, presumably smarts. I could be up for that.
Prediction: Nolan's reputation both with the fanboys and as a director of smarter than-average blockbusters (see *The Prestige*, *Memento*) bodes well for the box office, but no one should expect *Dark Night* returns.

Aaaaand that's the science fiction we've got for the summer, unless you want to count *Cats & Dogs: The Revenge of Kitty Galore* (July 30), and I think I'd rather scoop out my own eyes than do that.

—April 28, 2010 *Next 193, Previous 263*

The 2010 Summer SciFi Wrap-Up

Unless you count the limited rerelease of *Avatar* this weekend (now with more Navi sex) all the summer science fiction releases have hit the screens. So now's as good a time as any to do a summer science fiction postmortem.

First, despite the fact that there were relatively few science fiction films this summer, it was a fine summer for science fiction at the box office. *Iron Man 2*, *Inception*, and *Despicable Me* have grossed $800 million between them to date, or about 11 percent of the entire 2010 box office haul so far. Hollywood's not going to complain about that.

Now, intellectual honesty requires me to note that in two of those three cases the movies were science fiction too, rather than promoted as science-fiction films directly. *Iron Man 2* is a superhero flick, which genre is often, but not always, science-fictional, while *Despicable Me* was marketed as an animated family film. But this can be seen as a feature, not a bug. Enough science fiction tropes have been embedded in the public consciousness that when Gru tells his genetically engineered minions that he plans to steal the moon in *Despicable Me*, no one in the audience has to wonder whether enjoying that moment makes him or her a nerd. And that's how science fiction eventually wins the day.

Second, the most successful science fiction films this summer were also generally not dumb. *Inception*, of course, is so brain twisty that people are going to it more than once just to figure out whether they actually like it. But *Despicable Me* was smarter than it had to be, smarter than last year's comparable *Monsters vs. Aliens*, for example, and *Iron Man 2* was also pretty decent within the context of being a superhero film. Before that statement gets you all riled up, this is not damning with faint praise. It's acknowledging that with superhero films you have to allow for certain things to be wonky, like physics. Superhero universes, especially Marvel superhero universes—tend to be awfully complicated places. Moving along, *Splice*, which underperformed at the box office, was also fairly sharp, and *Predators*, if not placing a premium on brains, was at least not actively stupefying, like the *Alien vs. Predator* installments that preceded it.

This relative braininess is an uptick from 2009, when summer science fiction was represented by the likes of *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, and *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*, all of which encouraged jabbing a pen into your forebrain prior to viewing, and the new *Star Trek*, which, while highly enjoyable, was better if you put your hands over your ears and went "La la la" during Spock's science-murdering speech. Yes, there was also *District 9* last summer. We're talking overall percentages here.

I'm aware that currently there's a bit of an *Inception* backlashing going on, in which folks are complaining that the movie isn't nearly as smart as it thinks it is. I think that's a debate about a film is over whether it's really smart or just smart enough that you're doing okay.

Speaking of *Inception*, I noted a couple of weeks ago that I suspected the film might have some award nominations coming its way. To be more specific,

looking at both its critical and box-office success and because folks in the Academy are going to want to make up for slighting Christopher Nolan two years ago with *The Dark Knight*. I'm going to go on record and say that if *Inception* doesn't garner both Best Picture and Best Director nominations I am going to be extraordinarily surprised. I also suspect (with a lower level of confidence) that Nolan will get a Best Original Screenplay nod and if he does this will be the Oscar he goes home with (because screenwriting Oscars are very frequently the consolation Oscars for directors (See: Orson Wells, Quentin Tarantino, Paul Haggis.)

These predictions are contingent on how the rest of the year in film unfolds, but to be honest, looking at the rest of the film schedule for 2010, not much else is leaping out at me. In years past I'd say that *Everything You've Got*, the new James L. Brooks film, was a shoo-in, but *Spanglish* took the bloom off that rose. Nor are there tons of contenders in the films that are already out. And with the possible exception of *Toy Story 3*, none of them are of the "We spend hundreds of millions to get back even more hundreds of millions" blockbuster variety that *Inception* is. Science fiction films have an easier time getting on the ballot in weak Oscar years, which 2010 is shaping up as, and the Academy is sticking with ten Best Picture nominees this year.

So add it all up and not only do I think *Inception*'s bagging a Best Picture nomination but *Inception* is so far the only obvious Best Picture nominee for the year. And that's a fine way for science fiction to end its summer.

—August 25, 2010 *Next 153, Previous 197*

The Movie-Adaptation Chances for This Year's Hugo Class

I know you can't tell just by looking, but as you read this I am on the underside of the planet in Australia. Why? Because this year's Worldcon—the premier annual gathering of science fiction and fantasy lit geeks—is taking place in Melbourne. We will gather, talk science fiction, and hand out Hugo Awards, one of science fiction's very biggest awards.

Last year, I looked at the Hugo nominees for Best Novel and tried to guess their chances for being made into a film, as Hugo winners *Starship Troopers*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, and *Coraline*—the last a novella-category winner—have been. Let's take a look at this year's class and see how they might fare.

***Boneshaker*, by Cherie Priest**

What's it about? In a steampunkish U.S.A., a woman with a checkered past goes looking for her missing teenage son in the remains of a zombified Seattle.

Why it would make a great movie: Action, adventure, zeppelins, zombies, and both a strong female character and a young male character make it a must-see for moviegoers of both sexes and all interests.

Caveats: Steampunk films have not done so well, see (or, well, don't) *Wild Wild West* or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* for verification.

Chances for a movie version: They would be better if there were a hit steampunk film for producers to want to emulate.

***The City & the City*, by China Miéville**

What's it about? A police detective in *Mitteleuropa* tries to solve a murder that takes him to a neighboring city which shares a fantastical and disturbing history with his own.

Why it would make a great movie: The relationship of the two cities in the story is unique enough that I can't think of another film with a similar conceit. The lead character is perfect for an older but still cool lead. It has a noirish feel that critics would love.

Caveats: Mostly a dark story not exactly teen-date night movie fodder.

Chances for a movie version: Make it a smart indie with an equally smart director (like Alfonso Cuarón), and it could happen.

***Julian Comstock*, by Robert Charles Wilson**

What's it about? A somewhat satirical history of Julian Comstock, a war hero and then reforming president of a repressive post-21st-century United States.

Why it would make a great movie: The story follows its character for decades, into war and then into the presidency, meaning that it has all the ingredients to be a genuinely epic film.
Caveats: Genuinely epic films cost lots of money and the most epic film of a hero sewing together a post-collapse United States was called *The Postman*
Chances for a movie version: Not great. But you know what? It would make a great HBO mini-series.

***Palimpsest*, by Catherynne Valente**
What's it about? Four people discover a fantastical city that can only be entered by way of a most unconventional route. (Yes, it involves sex.)
Why it would make a great movie: Because it would be possibly the sexiest and also one of the most melancholy speculative fiction films ever made.
Caveats: I really don't think a major movie studio would have the slightest idea how to handle this one. Their marketing people's heads would explode just thinking about it.
Chances for a movie version: In Hollywood? Iffy. Outside of Hollywood? Give it to a director like Kar Wai Wong or Sally Potter and cineastes will have fist fights about it at Cannes. Which would be awesome.

***Wake*, by Robert J. Sawyer**
What's it about? A young woman undergoing a radical surgery to repair her blindness discovers instead that she's gained a different sort of sight and encounters a newborn intelligence floating out in the Web.
Why it would make a great movie: A number of intersecting stories, including that of an intelligent ape and of a Chinese blogger, give the story propulsion. Sawyer's writing offers easy adaptation to the big screen.
Caveats: Hollywood might have a difficult time thinking about an emerging machine consciousness that doesn't immediately devolve into Skynet, explosions, and death.
Chances for a movie version: Not bad. Sawyer's involvement in *FlashForward*, the TV series loosely based on his 1999 novel, means he's a known quantity. Which is generally a good thing.

***The Windup Girl*, by Paolo Bacigalupi**
What's it about? Intrigues and power positioning in a future Thailand where biotechnology isn't just worth killing for, it's worth toppling governments for.
Why it would make a great movie: It's a new take on a post-abundance world that, if handled the right way and with the right people (particularly visual designers), could become influential in the way *Blade Runner* is influential today.

Caveats *Blade Runner* wasn't financially successful in its time, and bean counters remember that.
Chances for a movie version: Hard to say, although it's already won the Nebula (the other big award in science fiction), so if it wins the Hugo as well that could add to its cachet as a hot property.

Which book will win? We'll find out this Sunday evening.

—September 1, 2010 Next 345, Previous 151

Predicting the Box Office for This Year's Holiday SciFi and Fantasy Flicks

The official holiday movie season began this last weekend, and for fans of science fiction and fantasy things went pretty well, as the animated sci-fi film *Megamind* walked off with a $47 million opening and the top slot for the week. What other delights can we expect for the season, and how will they do at the box office? Here are my guesses through the end of the year.

***Skyline* (11/12)**
The aliens have come and, if the trailers are to be believed, apparently they see us as tasty vacuum-able snacks. The film comes across as a mash-up of *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, and, while it looks like it could be fun in that "Help the aliens are stomping us into jelly" sort of way, it's directed by the Strause brothers, who directed the murky and entirely un-fun *AVPR: Aliens vs Predator – Requiem*. Hopefully they've upped their skills since then.
Box office?
Moderate to good. I'm guessing that splitting the action audience with *Unstoppable* (featuring Denzel Washington and *Star Trek*'s Chris Pine) will probably keep it out of the weekend's top slot.

***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (11/19)**
You know, maybe it's just me, but I think this film series is played out. I give it one or maybe two more films tops. More seriously, if you need me to explain this film to you, the year 2000 is calling and is telling you it wants you to come home. I'm looking forward to this one because I think the series has gotten better as it's gone along, and how many series can you say that about, especially ones that are on film No. 7?
Box office?
Oh, you know, I think it will do just fine.

***Heartless* (11/19):** Demons appear to be running around London, snacking on the populace, while a hero with a birthmarked photographer makes something akin to a deal with the Devil. Remember people, when some sweet-looking dude shows up offering you everything you want, there's probably a price.
Box office?
Small. Opening up against *Harry Potter* is a good way to get squashed.

***Tangled* (11/23):** The Disney animated take on the Rapunzel story. Look children! Another Disney princess marketing bonanza! Despite that, yeah, it looks kind of cute, and I have a daughter right smack dab in the middle of the film's intended demographic, so guess where I'll be the weekend it comes out?
Box office?
Disney animation and the holidays are generally a good recipe for box office happiness.

***The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (12/10)**
The latest installment of the Narnia series. The last film in the series, *Prince Caspian*, didn't perform as expected, but then again it also came out in the summer, rather than the better hitting-for-a-set es based on Christian-allegory holiday season. As a consequence, the series has a new distributor in the U.S. with Fox taking over for Disney.
Box office?
It's hard to say; we'll find out whether kids and families are over Narnia or whether moving these films back closer to Christmas does the trick. The best-case scenario for the film has it landing somewhere between the first and second films in terms of gross; the worst-case scenario has it being the holiday season's most prominent flop.

***TRON: Legacy* (12/17)**
The most anticipated science fiction film of the season, hands down, with entire generations of nerds and geeks just itching to get back into the seamless computerized landscape and take another ride on the light cycles. Let's just hope that Disney's programmed an actual story in there this time, because anyone who remembers the first film will recall that the story line was a bug, not a feature.
Box office?
Huge — not in the least because this is the one film this season that people actually want to see in 3-D. I suspect Disney is already prepping a third film.

***Gulliver's Travels* (12/22)**
Jack Black does Jonathan Swift, and I apologize to you for putting that image into your head. This film, this is — We are logy with 40,000 calories of holiday feast and now want to daze dumbly at a movie screen; slot for the holiday season; there's nothing about this film that does not say "cheerfully stupid" to me. But sometimes you need cheerful stupidity. Oh, don't look at me like that; you know I'm right.
Box office?
It depends on whether people decide to see this or *Little Fockers* for their post-feast viewing. I'm guessing *Fockers* has the edge, but you never know.

—November 10, 2010 Next 277, Previous 27

The Most Notable Science-Fiction Films of 2010

With the successful release of *Tron: Legacy*, we're pretty much done with science fiction film in 2010. Last year around this time I did a piece on my thoughts on the most-notable science-fiction films of the year. I'm going to repeat that now except, you know, with this year's films.

***Inception*:**[1]
Christopher Nolan's inner-space exploration of the mind gets my nod for the best science-fiction film of the year, hands down, and also my nod as one of the best films of the year in any genre. I also think it's a lock for a Best Picture nomination and probably a Best Director nomination as well. (It already has nominations for both at the Golden Globes.) Importantly, it's good science fiction in no small part because it's a very good film. Its plot rewards attention — Nolan is a director who takes as a given the idea that his audience isn't stupid, which is gratifying these days — and its look offers a sumptuousness that rewards staring. The acting wasn't bad, either.

Significantly, Nolan used practical effects whenever possible (the hallway fight scenes used a revolving set, which gave his dream worlds an ironically concrete grounding in reality). He's in many ways as old school a filmmaker as there is out there. Nolan's attention to detail and willingness to assume his audience has a brain, despite the fact that he's making $200 million films makes me hope that the future of intelligent film isn't just confined to tiny indies. And that's worth an award or two right there.

***Iron Man 2*:**[2]
Financially the most successful science-fiction film of the year — domestically, that is; *Inception* has yet to beat worldwide, which tells you something about the movie-business wisdom that movies can't be too complex if you want them to travel — *Iron Man 2* represents the current state of the art for studio filmmaking. And what is the current state of the art? It's pretty loud, steeped in pop culture, and just smart enough that you don't have to feel embarrassed that you're watching it as you shove popcorn into your mouth.

This is a better state of the art than usual, so you won't hear me complain too much. On the other hand, I will say that if Hollywood decided to take a year or two off on comic book hero films, I wouldn't complain too much about that either. They won't do that, of course — they're making too much money off of them — but creatively they can do worse than to give us a breather.

***Despicable Me*[3] and *Megamind*:[4]**
A friend of mine griped about the fact that these animated films did better financially than the large majority of science fiction films made for adults. But I

can't find it in my heart to get too worked up about it. First, they were perfectly decent entertainments, particularly *Despicable Me*, and when a film pretty much does what it says it will on the tin you can't fault it too much. Two of the most successful films of the year amused children with the power of science fiction? Cry me a river. It's never too early for geek indoctrination.

Predators:
This film, aside from being the best Predator film since the first one—yes, I know, what does that really mean?—interests me because it's pretty much the exact definition of a "programmer": a not too expensive flick designed to appeal to a particular segment of an audience and to make just enough money to pay itself back. It did. For this I commend producer Robert Rodriguez. I'm not saying he wouldn't have been happy if his film made more, mind you. But I think he looked at the $125 million the film made worldwide—three times what it cost to make—then looked at the flick and said, "That'll do." *Predators*, That'll do.

Splice:
And this is what happens when you make a programmer and it doesn't work. Shame, that. I find it interesting that Adrien Brody was the star of this and *Predators*.

Tron: Legacy:
I know that as a geek of long standing I'm supposed to look at the $46 million opening weekend of this film as a vindication of my lifestyle choices. Some wit online noted that *Tron* was like *Twilight* for nerds, and, God help me, I can't fault that assessment. But I'll tell you what I look at *Tron: Legacy* and the thought that comes to my head is not, This is payback for the jock who stuffed me into a locker, but instead, Why does *Tron* have a sequel and not *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*? Because that, to me, would be vindication. For everything. Ever.

—December 22, 2010 Next 353, Previous 199

Science Fiction Movies in 2011—What I Want to See

What? A new year already? They do keep springing them on us, don't they? And always around the same time. Suspicious, that. But a new year also means a new slate of science fiction films to get excited about. I've looked at the film schedules of 2011, and in them I have found ten science-fiction films I'm (tentatively) looking forward to this year. Which films and why (and when do they come out)? Well, let me tell you.

Mar. 4 - *The Adjustment Bureau:* Oh no! Sinister men in serious hats want to keep Matt Damon and Emily Blunt apart. Such nefariousness. It's based on a Philip K. Dick story, which explains the paranoid edge, and is the directorial debut of George Nolfi, who wrote *The Bourne Ultimatum* (good) and *Timeline* (yikes). Still, good actors, sharp-looking trailer, interesting idea. I'm in.

Mar. 11 - *Battle: Los Angeles:* Alien-invasion movies are cropping up all over the place in 2011—alien invasions are the new sparkly vampires—and, of all the alien invasion movies, this one looks the most explode-y. So what the hell? I'm in, just for the damage. Although if the aliens mess with In-N-Out Burger I'm coming down there myself to have a word with them. Oh, and a cast featuring Aaron Eckhart and Michelle Rodriguez is not such a bad thing, either.

Mar. 18 - *Paul:* Simon Pegg and Nick Frost (the two of the three dudes behind *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*) play British nerds who pick up an alien outside Area 51 and then get chased around by Jason Bateman as a special agent. I'm racking my brain to see a downside to this scenario, and I'm just not seeing it. Well, Seth Rogen as the voice of the alien. But that's my problem, not the film's.

Mar. 22 - *Sucker Punch:* Man, I keep watching the trailer for this film, in which Emily Browning plays a mental patient visiting a number of alternate universes, and I have no idea what's supposed to be going on. I just know I want to see more of it. Directed by Zack Snyder of *300* and *Watchmen*. Snyder doesn't always hit, but at least he always comes out swinging.

Apr. 1 - *Source Code:* Two years ago, director Duncan Jones dropped himself into the hearts of science fiction lovers everywhere with *Moon*, which was not only (arguably) the best science fiction movie of its year but one of the best films of the year, period. *Source Code*, in which Jake Gyllenhaal inhabits someone else's body to stop a bombing, looks somewhat louder and more action oriented, which is not necessarily a plus. But after *Moon*, Jones has some credit to burn.

Jun. 10 - ***Super 8:*** So I liked *Cloverfield* better than just about anyone else I know, and much of the credit for the film goes to J.J. Abrams, who produced it. So now Abrams is helming what appears to be another alien-monster film, this one produced by Steven Spielberg, set in the seventies. If he pulls this off, I might even be willing to forgive him the red matter in the last *Star Trek* film. Maybe.

Jun. 17 - ***Green Lantern:*** Disclosure: from the trailer and from the fact that they cast Ryan Reynolds, I expect this film to have the IQ of a small dazed puppy. On the other hand, director Martin Campbell has a track record of making stupid films seems smarter than they are, and when I was a kid Green Lantern was my favorite DC superhero. What are you gonna do? I'm grading this one on a curve.

Jul. 29 - ***Cowboys & Aliens:*** Remember how I said that this was an alien invasion kind of year? Yeah, that. I'm very curious to see whether director Jon Favreau can pull this one off, the track record for science-fiction and/or comic-book-related Westerns is very bad indeed. (See *Jonah Hex* and *Wild Wild West*.) But the presence of Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford means that even if it fails it'll fail with at least a little bit of style.

Sep. 30 - ***Now:*** The good news: in the future, you don't have to age anymore. The bad news: time is now used as a currency, and most people in the future, unfortunately, have about as much time as most people have money today. Interesting concept, and director Andrew Niccol has played with interesting science-fiction concepts before (*Gattaca* being his calling card), and he's got a very hip young cast: Justin Timberlake, Cillian Murphy, Amanda Seyfried, and Olivia Wilde.

Oct. 14 - ***The Thing:*** Not actually a remake of the 1982 John Carpenter film (itself a remake of the 1951 movie *The Thing From Another World*) but a prequel covering the events at the Norwegian Antarctic camp that met the Thing before the American camp of the 1982 film. Whatever, man. I'm in for the hopefully awesome special effects and because I have a wee crush on Mary Elizabeth Winstead. Yes, I'm a nerd. Sue me.

—January 5, 2011 Next 285, Previous 353

Science Fiction at the 2011 Oscars

Last year the Oscar nominations were unusually kind to science fiction with both *Avatar* and *District 9* nabbing Best Picture noms and both of them (and *Star Trek*) getting a raft of other nominations. This year, the Oscars were not nearly so kind, but there is good news, including the Best Picture nomination of *Inception*. So let's get into this year's notes on the Academy Awards and sci-fi.

1. The biggest news in science fictional Oscars is that *Inception*, as I not-so-bravely predicted last year, has come away with a Best Picture nomination as well as nominations for Art Direction, Cinematography, Original Score, Sound Editing, Sound Mixing, Visual Effects, and Original Screenplay. Eight nominations in all, which is a hell of a nomination haul. There's very little to complain about here.

2. Except that *Inception* was not also graced with a Best Director nod for Christopher Nolan, which effectively takes it out of actual contention for the Picture Oscar. It's been decades since a film has won Best Picture without its director being at least nominated. The last was *Driving Miss Daisy*, in 1989. Given the overall Best Picture slate this year and the fact that the six nominated directors (Darren Aronofsky, David O. Russell, Tom Hooper, David Fincher, and Joel and Ethan Coen) are also nominated for Best Picture, there's very little chance that *Inception* is going to be the film that breaks tradition.

So while *Inception* becomes only the sixth science fiction film to get a Best Picture nod—and let's not discount that achievement—it is also very likely to become the sixth film of that genre not to take home the award. At least Nolan can content himself with his two nominations, both in that category: he's one of two listed producers, and also for Original Screenplay.

3. Okay, so, outside of *Inception*, what Academy nomination spoils does the science fiction genre gain this year? Let's see. *Iron Lady* has a nod for Best Sound Editing, *Iron Man 2* has a nod in Visual Effects, and... well, that's pretty much it. So even in the technical categories where science fiction does pretty well, it's not a spectacular year for the genre. This is a general reflection of the 2010 year in cinematic science fiction, which outside of *Inception* was not one of the really great ones. The real surprise for me was the Best Animated Feature Film category. It lacks *Despicable Me*, which I thought had a good chance at a nod. But nope, science fiction's out in the cold there as well.

4. If we expand our gaze a bit to include fantasy films as well, things perk up a bit. *Toy Story 3* got Best Picture, Adapted Screenplay, Animated Feature Film, Sound Editing, and Song nods. *How to Train Your Dragon* also saw a Best Animated Film nod and a surprising Score nomination. *Alice in Wonderland* claimed three nominations: Best Art Direction, Costume Design, and Visual

Effects. Harry Potter's latest film also popped up for Best Visual Effects, while *The Wolfman*[4] got a Makeup nod for Rick Baker, who won the first award in that category in 1981 for another hairy film, *An American Werewolf in London*.

It's also not a bad year for actors who owe some portion of their fame to science fiction. James Franco and Jesse Eisenberg, who came to fame in *Spider-Man* and *Zombieland*, respectively, received Best Actor nominations, while Batman himself, Christian Bale, is the front runner in the Supporting Actor category. And of course there's Princess Amidala, Natalie Portman, who is currently a good bet to walk away with the Best Actress statuette for her role in *Black Swan*[5].

5. So when all is said and done, how will science fiction do at the Oscars this year? Okay, if not great. As noted earlier, I think *Inception* has very little chance at winning Best Picture. In most of the other categories, it has some good chances, in part because of its Best Picture nod.

The two categories to watch in particular are Cinematography and Original Screenplay. In the former, *Inception* is the film in the category that is the most daring in how it uses the camera, and it doesn't hurt that some of the most visually intense scenes in the film, the hallway fight scene, were not done inside a computer, which means the camera folks had to get in there. Nolan might get Best Original Screenplay as a consolation Oscar, if there's a feeling in Academy land that he was cheated out of a Director nod. I would be fine with this because, hey, an Oscar is an Oscar, and it really is a very good script.

And that's where we are for the Oscars and science fiction this year.

—January 26, 2011 *Next 289, Previous 287*

Oscar Wrap-up, Plus Sales (of My Book!) and Disclosures

This week's column is going to be a bit of a grab bag of two unrelated items because hey, isn't life sometimes a bit of a grab bag? No? It's just me with the grab-bag-y attitude? Well, fine. I'm going to do it my way anyway.

The Oscars and Science Fiction

The Oscars have come and gone, and in their wake we find almost no surprises whatsoever. *Inception*, which had been nominated for Best Picture (but not Director) was not at all surprisingly passed over for the top accolade, which was instead handed to *The King's Speech*, which also picked up Director, Actor, and Original Screenplay—the latter also at the expense of *Inception*. I thought there might be a chance Nolan would nab Best Screenplay as a sort of consolation Oscar, but no: the Academy went for history instead of science fiction (literally, as *The King's Speech*'s screenwriter, David Seidler, is the oldest recipient of that award at age 74). But I expect Nolan will be up for an Oscar again before he's done, and in the meantime his films make hundreds of millions at the box office. He will survive.

That said, *Inception* did win as many Oscars as *The King's Speech*, which is to say four—for visual effects (well deserved), sound mixing, sound editing (both particularly well deserved), and cinematography (especially well deserved). Cinematographer Wally Pfister had been nominated three times before, each time for a previous Nolan film. As much as anything else, the award acknowledges how much of the feel of Nolan's work comes out of Pfister's camera. Well done, him.

The drawback here is that we see science fiction in the same position it's generally in: winning Oscars in technical and visual categories but taking a backseat in the most prominent categories. We're still waiting on the science fiction Best Picture winner. The good news here is that three science-fiction Best Picture nominations in two years suggest that it's no longer a matter of if but when.

Science fiction also snapped up one other award on Oscar night: Best Animated Short Film, which was given to *The Lost Thing*, by Hugo Award-winning artist Shaun Tan and Andrew Ruhemann. I met Shaun very briefly last year in Australia at the World Science Fiction Convention, and he was a lovely individual. It's equally lovely to see him win this particular award.

Now on to another matter entirely.

Your Humble Narrator

I think most of you who read this column are aware that when I'm not writing this I'm writing science fiction novels. Well, last week it was announced that Paramount Pictures had bought the rights to one of those novels, *Old Man War*, in order to make a movie out of it and that the project already

had a screenwriter, producer, and director attached (David Self, Scott Stuber, and Wolfgang Petersen, respectively). I can confirm that this is indeed all true, although I will note at the moment that everything is in very early stages and that anything can happen — including nothing. Still, pretty exciting stuff.

I mention the sale not just to share the news but in the interest of complete disclosure. I do, after all, write about science fiction films, and both Paramount and Stuber make those. As a result, in the future I will probably recuse myself from speaking in a critical manner, positively or negatively, about Stuber-produced films in this column, and when I mention Paramount films I'll put in a disclosure statement at the bottom of the column mentioning my relationship. Transparency in these matters is a good thing.

Now, in the wake of this news, I've been asked what the secret is to getting a book bought by a studio. I'm afraid the answer I have to this question is not particularly satisfying, because I think the way to do it is: a) write a book that you, as a reader, would really enjoy reading, and b) be lucky. Like, really, really lucky.

The first of these is entirely in the writer's hands (assuming he or she is a competent enough writer). Assuming that what the writer wants to read is also something that others might enjoy, it will help to sell the book to a publisher, too. But from there, luck increasingly plays a role. Having a book be successful when equally good books are less so? There's luck involved there. Having a book noticed by tastemakers and/or award voters? More luck. Having the books then develop the crown and ence which makes them attractive to film producers and studios? More luck, still. Having a book whose subject matter coincides with what movie studios are putting money into that particular year? Well, you get where I'm going with this.

My suggestion to anyone hoping to sell a book to the movies is this: focus on writing a book you would really enjoy reading. That way, no matter what else happens, you're happy with your work. And at the end of the day, that's what you want.

—March 2, 2011 Next 357, Previous 201

Spring 2011 Science Fiction in Review

The summer movie season gets its (unofficial) start next week, when *Thor*, the first of the year's big-budget comic book flicks, thunders its way into theaters. Before it does, let's do a brief recap of our surprisingly science fiction-heavy spring and look at how the genre did in the theaters.

The short answer is this: it did all right. Two science-fiction films are in the year's current top ten: *Battle: Los Angeles* and *Limitless*, which are at numbers six and eight, respectively, while *The Adjustment Bureau* and *I Am Number Four* bubble just under the top ten, at numbers twelve and thirteen. However, none of these films cracked the $100 million box-office mark, which stands as the informal border for blockbuster territory and—with potential blockbusters like *Thor* and new instalments of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Hangover*, and *Kung Fu Panda* on their way in May—*Battle* and *Limitless* won't stay in the top ten for very long (and if they do, man, oh man, is Hollywood ever in trouble).

Some further thoughts on spring's science fiction films, listed in order of their domestic-box-office success.

Battle: Los Angeles ($82.6 million): I personally thought that this film might have had a chance to do better, but it was plagued by poor reviews. While that didn't keep away the film's core audience of young men, it stopped the film from going beyond them. The film made back its $70 million production budget at home, and its $200 million worldwide box office is good, but not inspiring. Don't wait up nights for the sequel.

Limitless ($74 million): *Limitless* made less than *Battle: Los Angeles*, but then it also cost substantially less to make ($27 million, according to Box Office Mojo), got decent reviews, and showed that Bradley Cooper could open a movie that did not involve him being hung over. So in the abstruse calculus used to determine what's a hit and what's not, *Limitless* is a clear if modest success.

The Adjustment Bureau ($61 million): This film has a geeky core of a science-fictional idea surrounded by a hip and cool exterior. Call it *Mad Men* meets *Dark City*. It was marketed less as sci-fi and more as a conspiracy thriller. Considering Matt Damon's and Emily Blunt's fan bases, this was not a bad thing to do. With a $50 million budget, this stands as a modest success and was also good news for Damon and Blunt, whose previous high profile films *Green Zone* and *The Wolfman* did not exactly set the box office on fire.

I Am Number Four ($54 million): This film, aimed at *Twilight*'s core audience, cost slightly more to make ($60 million) than it brought in, which is not good, but it was also rather explicitly intended to be the first film of a series, which makes its underwhelming performance worse in the grand scheme of things. It's fair to call this film a disappointment.

Source Code ($44.6 million) This film represents a leveling up for *Moon* director Duncan Jones in terms of production budget and star power, and it worked out pretty well for him—the film was well reviewed, made back its budget, and is still in theaters. Don't be entirely surprised if some studio gives him a $100 million budget to play with sometime soon.

Paul ($36 million). This humorous film starring an alien is by science fiction nerds for science fiction nerds, and, as such, has done science-fiction nerd business, opening up with $13 million and trundling on agreeably from there. It didn't quite get back its $40 million production budget, but this is likely to have a long and happy life on home video, so I don't think anyone's terribly upset.

Sucker Punch ($35.8 million). It was a very bad thing for director Zack Snyder when this pet project got thumped at the box office by *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules*. With an $80 million production budget and an underwhelming overseas box office, this qualifies as an out-and-out flop. Snyder's going to survive it—he's already at work on the new Superman movie—but he's probably sweating bullets. If his Superman doesn't fly, it's back to cheap horror films for him.

Mars Needs Moms[8] ($20.8 million). At least Snyder can take comfort in knowing he didn't make a historic flop, as the filmmakers of this animated film did. That *Mars* cost $150 million to make and had a $7 million opening weekend qualifies it as a catastrophe. Just ask ImageMovers Digital, the animation house responsible for it. Disney announced it would shut it down the day the film opened. That's rough.

So spring science fiction in 2011: good, not great. Now let's see what summer has in store for us.

—April 27, 2011 Next 169, Previous 293

Gaaah, Meh, or w00t!
The 2011 SciFi and Fantasy Preview

Hey! The summer movie season starts this weekend, and from here through Labor Day it's comic book characters, explosions, and less-than Oscar-caliber acting and writing all designed to get you in your seat and munching popcorn. Excited? Excellent. Here's my quick take on the summer's science fiction and fantastic would be hits, which I grade in order of increasing enthusiasm, as follows: Gaaah, "Meh," Hmmm, and w00t. Because ranking by stars or letter grade is boring.

***Thor* (May 6):**
What's it about? The Norse god of thunder, or more accurately, the comic book version of the same, is tossed out of Asgard and ends up having to defend the Earth. Oh, and he's dating Natalie Portman.
Am I excited? Hmmm. I've never been a huge Thor fan, but the director here is Kenneth Branagh, who once got a Best Director nomination at the Oscars for *Henry V*. Will Branagh be slumming or classing up the joint? That's what I want to know.

***Priest* (May 13):**
What's it about? In the future dystopic theocracy, those are the best kind, a renegade assassin priest defies the church in order to hunt vampires. In 3-D!
Am I excited? Meh. I'm fond of star Paul Bettany, and the flick promises at least your minimum daily requirement of wirework action. But the whole thing looks like a prog-metal album cover spooling by at 24 frames a second.

***Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (May 20):**
What's it about? Captain Jack Sparrow is back and searching for the Fountain of Youth. Because even Johnny Depp isn't getting any younger, although co-star Penelope Cruz seems to be maintaining just fine.
Am I excited? Meh. The first film in the series was fun, but the sequels were tiresome. Perhaps new director Rob Marshall can bring back the vibe of the first film, but I'm not holding my breath for that.

***X-Men: First Class* (Jun. 3):**
What's it about? The origins of Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr, aka Professor X and Magneto, who, before they were on opposing sides of the mutant wars, were friends using their special mutant talents during the Cuban Missile Crisis.
Am I excited? Hmmm. The last X-Men film wasn't exactly good, and didn't exactly make sense, but I'm a fan of director Matthew Vaughn, who did the underrated *Stardust*, and leads James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender both seem eager to give their characters some depth. Hope the screenplay lets them.

***Super 8* (Jun. 10):**
What's it about? A train from Area 51 derails in Ohio, and a bunch of kids with cameras are there to document the strange things that happen next.
Am I excited? WOO! Yes, I am. This J.J. Abrams film, set in the late seventies, seems aimed directly at the heart of Spielberg territory (it's produced by Spielberg, even), and I'm very interested to see if Abrams, who recently resurrected *Star Trek*, can get back that very specific film vibe. I'm optimistic.

***Green Lantern* (Jun. 17):**
What's it about? A hotshot pilot becomes part of an interstellar law force when he comes across a mystical green ring. Will he be required to save the universe? Oh, probably.
Am I excited? Hmmm. Green Lantern is a second-tier DC hero, in my estimation, and I'm not the world's biggest Ryan Reynolds fan. But director Martin Campbell is one of the most consistently effective action directors out there, so I have some hope he can put this film through the right paces.

***Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (Jul. 1):**
What's it about? Oh, you know. Transformers. And this time, they go to the moon.
Am I excited? Gaaah. No. Even Michael Bay, of all people, has admitted the previous film in the series stank up the room, so there's that. But while Bay can recognize the obviously bad, none of the rest of his films suggests he has much of a handle on what is actually good. So I expect this to be standard-issue Michael Bay: *i.e.* loud, messy, and mostly stupid.

***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* (Jul. 15):**
What's it about? The climactic end of the Harry Potter series, in which our hero confronts the evil wizard Voldemort and the fate of the wizard world and our own hangs in the balance.
Am I excited? WOO! Definitely. This is one of the few series that has gotten consistently better the longer it's gone on, and as this is the last film they're going to pull out all the stops, I'm very excited and plan to see it in 2-D because I think 3-D will get in the way.

***Captain America: The First Avenger* (Jul. 22):**
What's it about? A scrawny would-be WWII soldier is transformed by science into a buff super-soldier and then goes after some Nazis (like you do).
Am I excited? Meh. This will be the fourth major superhero film of the season, and I'm feeling fatigued just knowing I'll have slogged through three others to get to this one. But it has Hugo Weaving as the bad guy, and he's always fun to watch.

***Cowboys & Aliens* (Jul. 29):**
What's it about? A man wakes up in the Wild West with no memory and a weird object clapped on his wrist. What is it? A gun for shooting aliens, who show up presently.
Am I excited? Wild? Yes. The cast includes Daniel Craig as the hero and Harrison Ford as the less than-good guy, and director Jon Favreau has earned some good will with the Iron Man flicks. This could be a lot of fun.

***Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Aug. 5):**
What's it about? What happens when you give apes intelligence? If you say "Why, they try to take over the world," you may be right.
Am I excited? Meh. I'm willing to be surprised, and the ape effects look good. (Old ape hand Andy Serkis, who played King Kong, plays the main ape character.) But the last visit to the planet of the apes didn't exactly thrill me. Also, human star James Franco better bring something besides the smug.

***Conan the Barbarian* (Aug. 19):**
What's it about? What's best in life, of course: crushing one's enemies and hearing the lamentations of their women!
Am I excited? Grrrah! I very strongly suspect I will need to clip off the blood flow to my brain in order to sit through this one.

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Movies and Money

$20 Million Now, $20 Million Then—How *Star Wars* Changed Movie Math

There he goes, there goes *Speed Racer*—right into a *wall*. Last weekend *Speed Racer* crashed and burned at the box office, pulling in a feeble $20 million. This gives 2008 its first major SF flop and assures that Warner Bros. and its financing partners are going to eat most of the rumored $150 million production cost of the film (not to mention the additional tens of millions for marketing). Right now, the Wachowskis are sitting in a dark room, looking at the numbers and realizing that they really do have to stop cruising on the cred they earned on the original *Matrix* flick—that's all gone now.

If Only the Wachowskis Had Released *Speed Racer* 31 Years Earlier. Because here's something interesting. On July 15, 1977, after several weeks in limited release, *Star Wars* had its official wide release and pulled in $6.8 million for the weekend—which, adjusted for inflation, would be about $20.9 million dollars today. *Star Wars* would go on to make more than $300 million in its initial release (a gobsmacking $930 million or so in 2008 dollars), and, of course, go down in movie history, spawning a franchise that is even now dropping films into theaters. (The animated *Clone Wars* heading to screens in August.)

So the question which the Wachowskis might ruefully ask is: Why does a $20 million opening spell disaster for *Speed Racer* today when its equivalent was absolutely fantastic for *Star Wars*, back in the day? Movies are still the same strips of images on film stock in 2008 as they were in 1977—has everything else about movies changed so much?

Well, yes. Movies are physically the same objects they were 31 years ago (although probably not for long, as more theaters go digital), and people still go to theaters to see them. But everything else about the mechanics of making money at the movies has changed.

In 1977, for example, if you were suggest to a movie executive that you should open a film in 3,000 theaters like *Speed Racer* was last weekend, you would get a blank, non-comprehending stare. *Star Wars*—and nearly every other movie of the time—had its debut on just a few dozen theaters (43, in the case of *Star Wars*, all clustered in and around major metro areas). If a movie did well, they'd add a few dozen more screens the next week, and a few dozen more the week after that, and so on. In a lot of 1977, the movie never made it into more than 1,100 theaters—less than a third of *Speed Racer*'s opening weekend count.

You would think that smaller number of theaters would cut down on the amount of money you could make—and indeed, all through 1977, *Star Wars* never managed to make more than $7.3 million a weekend (about $25 million today). But what *Star Wars* could do that *Speed Racer* and other movies today generally can't is just keep running. From its first limited release on Memorial Day weekend 1977, *Star Wars* stayed in movie theaters for nearly an entire

year[3], and for that year experienced very small drop-offs in business from weekend to weekend. Between ten and twenty percent each weekend. Compare this to last year's *Transformers*, which made $300 million in six weeks[4]—and experienced 40 to 50 percent dropoffs in attendance each week. In both their eras *Star Wars* and *Transformers* are state-of-the-art blockbusters, in terms of how they made their money—it's just that the state of the art evolved.

How It Evolved

One: The studios recognized that when a movie is released at the right time—say, summer—you can get more people (read: kids) into the theaters and make more money faster.

Two: The studios have changed the way they share money with theaters, so now it's no longer as advantageous for a theater to keep a film for a long period of time.

Three: Theatrical release is no longer where movie studios make most of their money; it comes from home video, toys and other ancillary markets.

When did all this start changing? If you guessed, *oh, probably right after Star Wars came out,* you'd be perfectly correct.

Speed Racer is doomed. There's no chance that *Speed* will get up to speed from here. Tomorrow the family audiences that were supposed to go see it will go flock to *Prince Caspian* instead, and then the weekend after that Indiana Jones is back. *Speed Racer* will be in the second-run movie theaters by the first week in June, with nothing to else to look forward to until its financial afterlife on DVD and HBO. All because of two $20 million opening weekends. Its own, and the one *Star Wars* had adjusted for inflation, 31 years ago.

—May 15, 2008 Next 43, Previous 41

Selling Your SciFi Novel to Hollywood: Is It Just About the Money?

Last week's column about why the movie of your favorite science fiction book probably stinks (see page 75, Why the Movie Version of Your Favorite SciFi Book Stinks, Part I) generated a nice set of comments and e-mail (thanks!). One message asked a question that I think is worth examining:

If science fiction writers know their books are going to be mangled by Hollywood, why do they keep selling them to Hollywood in the first place? Is it just about the money?

The short answer is: Yeah, it's pretty much about the money. If a book gets made into a movie, and that's a *really big* if, that writer is going to get a pretty nice payday. Science fiction writers have mortgages too, and might even want to send their kids to college. But the long answer, aside from being longer, is more subtle.

Money Without Movies

First, know this: Overall, very few films are made from science fiction novels, and it frequently takes decades for a science fiction novel to make it into theaters. *Starship Troopers* was published in 1959 and made into a movie in 1997 (nearly 40 years later). *I, Robot* was published in 1950 and a movie with its same title, tangentially related to the book, hit screens 54 years later. *Dune*, published in 1965, merely had to wait two decades before its first film iteration. *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card has been in limbo since 1985, when the novel was published.

But the good news for science fiction writers is that there's a lovely way for them to make money from filmmakers, even if their books never reach the silver screen. They're called *options*, and they work like this: A film producer pays a novelist a set sum of money for the right to try to make one of their novels into a film. This option is for a set period of time, generally a year or two, after which the filmmaker either renews the option for additional money, or drops it. If the option is dropped, the writer can sell the option to another filmmaker for another set of money. If the novel is perennially popular, a writer can keep selling the option for years. Individual options are generally not huge sums of money, but add it up over time and you have a nice portfolio of cash flow without a single frame being shot.

Ironically, one of the greatest risks for a writer is not that one of his books will never be made into a film, but that one *is*, and it stinks, then the option well runs dry. As long as you don't have a film made, you have no track record of failure, and Hollywood is far less afraid of the unknown than it is of failure.

Sales and Stature

Besides the direct economic benefit, either in options or the check cut once the book is made into a film, there are two other advantages for science fiction writers, even if their novels are eviscerated while being adapted. The first is that when the movie hits theaters, the sales of the book can get a huge shot in the arm (especially if the publisher has been smart enough to release a version of the book tied into the film release). Earlier this year, Steven Gould's novel *Jumper* jumped onto the *New York Times* bestseller lists nearly two decades after it was originally published, thanks to the release of the Doug Liman–directed film *Jumper*, did good but-not-chart busting box office ($80 million North America, $220 million worldwide), but all the marketing and attention in the run up to the movie's release gave the book a significant boost.

The second benefit for a science fiction writer is more nebulous. It's status not so much in the science fiction field, but in the common culture. The prime example of this is Philip K. Dick.[3] In life, he was celebrated in the science fiction field (he won the 1964 Best Novel Hugo for his book, *The Man in the High Castle*), but fame in the science fiction field doesn't necessarily (or usually) equate to fortune or recognition outside. Dick was frequently at loose ends financially. *Blade Runner* (based on his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), which debuted shortly after his death, helped raise his profile in Hollywood and outside of it, and a string of financially successful and/or artistically interesting films based on his work (*Total Recall*, *Minority Report*, *A Scanner Darkly*, etc.) have given serious literature critics the cultural cover they need both to examine and to celebrate his work[4].

There is some trenchant irony in film being a catalyst for a writer's work being taken seriously as literature, but this is science fiction we're talking about, a form which most readers of serious literature write off as hackwork without actually bothering to read any (because they're snobs, you see). Now, to be sure, not every sci-fi writer deserves critical reappraisal like Dick did, but having another medium vouch for your storytelling skills does work to the benefit of the writer.

At the very least, other writers who don't have movies made from their work, ha ha ha, won't give you as much crap, or if they do, everyone knows they're just jealous. And really: That's *better* than money.

—June 5, 2008 Next 303, Previous 75

Things We Learned From the Summer SciFi Box Office

The summer movie season closed up on Monday, breaking box office records (albeit just barely: $4.2 billion compared to last summer's $4.18 billion—which means that factoring in inflation, slightly fewer tickets were sold this year than last) and becoming a banner season for science fiction and fantasy movies. Depending on whether one wants to lump *The Dark Knight* into the tally (as "dark superhero fantasy"), seven of the summer's top ten films were SF/F based. Geeks can hardly complain about that.

Aside from "big expensive special effects movies make a lot of money in the summer," what lessons have we learned from the 2008 summer movie season, as they involve science fiction and fantasy movies? Here are a few to consider.

1. Smart is in: What do *The Dark Knight* and *Iron Man* have in common, aside from each being based on comic books and each grossing north of $300 million? The answer I'm looking for was that they were both critically lauded for being exceptionally smart films—an accolade unusual enough for summer blockbusters but pretty much unheard of for films in which the hero spends much of his time behind a mask. Both these films had action, adventure and effects up the wazoo, but then, so did *Speed Racer*, and look where that ended up (on second thought, don't. It's too gruesome). Add *WALL-E*, the best reviewed and most clever major film of the year so far, and its $200 million plus box office to the mix, and you come to a tantalizing conclusion that yes, actually, intelligence *is* a value-add to summer sci-fi blockbusters. Will Hollywood take this lesson to heart? Almost certainly not. But when three films add up to a billion dollars in domestic box office and the only connecting thread between them is intelligence, it's more than a sign.

2. Let TV shows stay on TV: *Speed Racer* and *X Files: I Want to Believe* combined grossed about $65 million—or a couple million dollars less than what *The Dark Knight* made on its opening Friday. The problem? The assumption of an audience that just wasn't there. In the case of *Speed Racer*, the belief seemed to be that Gen X affection for a kitschy Japanimation staple of their seven year old selves' afterschool TV habits would translate into massive box office. But apparently too few of us Gen Xers liked it enough to subject ourselves to two hours of seizure inducing Wachowski Brothers' craziness. With *X Files*, the problem was even simpler. All the *X-Files* audience had long since transferred their allegiance to Joss Whedon and J.J. Abrams (and even that's not enough; see: *Serenity*).

Speaking of Abrams, how will this sci-fi audience reaction of reheated TV affect his *Star Trek* reboot? I suspect not at all. *Star Trek* has long since become its own cultural phenomenon, something neither *Speed Racer* nor *X Files* can claim, and Paramount has done a fine job of geek stoking with its *Star Trek* pre-

release publicity. It's going to have to stink really bad to fail. But the fact that Abrams is having to reboot *Star Trek* at all brings us to our next lesson.

3. Even the mighty franchises can fall: George Lucas had the mightiest reelection of the *Star Wars* universe to date—*Star Wars Christmas Specials* notwithstanding—when his animated *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* movie barely snuck past $30 million. On one hand, no one expected *Clone Wars* to do the standard issue Star Wars film business, since the movie was basically repurposed episodes of the upcoming animated TV series that will show on Cartoon Network. But on the other, the critical and fan reaction to the movie was so bad that the Cartoon Network execs can't be happy that Lucas has essentially shot the TV series in the foot. Right about now they're probably wishing Lucas had followed lesson two to this one. The failure of *The Clone Wars* is not nearly close to being fatal—this is the franchise that survived the entire prequel trilogy—but it does remind us that even hardcore fans have their limits. At least the Star Wars video games are still good.

It's not only *Star Wars* that saw a dropoff this summer. *Prince Caspian*, the second *Chronicles of Narnia* movie, took in less than half of its predecessor (although that was a still respectable $141 million), the third *Mummy* film has yet to crack $100 million, which puts it also at about half the gross of its predecessor, and of course there's the *X Files* movie, doing double duty in this entry as well with its $20 million gross.

4. Will Smith + SF = $200 million: I don't think there's ever been a more reliable science fiction fantasy box office star than Will Smith. Harrison Ford comes close, but he had two wildly popular franchises to wrap around him, whereas Will Smith racks up huge numbers in standalone films (*I Robot*, *I Am Legend*, *Hancock*) as well as in his *Men in Black* franchise. All I know is that if I were making a science fiction movie, the first thing I would do would be to pay Will Smith whatever he wanted to get him in it. Everything else from that point would be easy. As with everything, Will Smith's moment on top won't last. But we're still in that moment.

Thus endeth my 2008 summer sf/f lessons. Thoughts? And do you have any lessons to add?

—September 4, 2008 Next 85, Previous 83

For SciFi Sequels, Taking a Chance Makes All the Difference

There's something almost miraculous about a movie sequel that doesn't stink. And for one simple reason: Hollywood doesn't do sequels for anything other than money.

In fact, *everyone* who produces commercial sequels does it for the money. I'm as guilty of this as anyone. When my novel *Old Man's War* became successful, I wrote a sequel, and then another, and then yet another. And the novel I'm currently working on is also a sequel. So I should be careful. Most current writers of science fiction and fantasy are sequel *mad*.

But when Hollywood does sequels for the money, they *really* do it for the money. Your average studio movie costs more than most people make in a lifetime, and, if a movie flops, everyone knows about it. So when a film hits, the call for a sequel goes out before the opening weekend receipts are even counted, and most studios want their sequels to be the same as the original, but with *more*—with the volume (action, special effects, actual volume) turned up.

This explains any number of science fiction sequels, from *The Lost World* to *The Chronicles of Riddick* to *Men in Black II*.

What very often does *not* make it into a sequel are things that might well make a movie better, like character development, an engaging plot, and a script that has the actors saying things that make it look like they're doing something other than making a studio accountant very happy. But movies that play with an already established formula are inherently risky, and for Hollywood, sequels are about risk mitigation.

So how does it happen that, from time to time, a sequel comes along that's not only as good but better than the original? My theory: It happens when Hollywood's determination to stick to a formula is undermined. A few examples:

1. ***Bride of Frankenstein*** **(1935):** In this case, it was the evolution of cinema itself that made the difference. Cameras became unblocked, musical scores matured, and film acting and writing stopped aping a theatrical model. The medium finally figured itself out.

2. ***The Empire Strikes Back*** **(1980):** George Lucas managed to wrangle the rights to the *Star Wars* sequel from Twentieth Century Fox and was able to make the movie he wanted. He upgraded not just the special effects but also the scriptwriting, which he palmed off to Lawrence Kasdan and Leigh Brackett. It's no wonder that so many of the good lines in the *Star Wars* universe come out of this film.

3. ***Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*** **(1982):** The first *Star Trek* film, from 1979, was expensive and successful, but many involved thought it was a bit of a dud. When Paramount decided to mount a sequel, it cut the budget drastically

(from $35 million to $11 million). The cuts turned out to be a blessing in disguise. *Khan* was the reboot of the *Star Trek* franchise. That's why the subsequent sequels are like *it*, not the first film.

4. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991): In many ways, *Terminator 2* was the "perfect storm" of science-fiction sequels. In the seven-year interim between it and the original, the director and star had both moved onto Hollywood's A-list, allowing for an immensely larger budget ($100 million from $6.4 million). James Cameron employed special-effects technology throughout, and, though the dictate "Everything the same, but more" was still applied, thicker plotting and characterization and better screenwriting amounted to a superior film. Cameron doesn't get nearly enough credit for stuff like this, but you notice when he doesn't have it (see *True Lies*) and when a franchise has lost it (*Terminator 3*, which was made without him).

Will Hollywood ever see the wisdom of taking some extra risks in their sequels? Probably not, because at the end of the day, movies are commercial products—the art happens at the edges—and it's better for the bottom line to do something tenable than to take a chance. When you see a good sequel, you should salute the filmmaker. He or she got something past the bean counters—and, these days, that really *is* a miracle.

—October 2, 2008 *Next 309, Previous 307*

What the Recession Means for SciFi Movies... Less *Trek*?

Another reader question! I do so love reader questions since they keep me from having to think up a column topic on my own. This one asks:

> How do you think the economic recession will affect movies in general, and science fiction and fantasy movies in particular?

This is a two part question. The first question is, how will the recession affect the way people go to the movies? The second is, how will the recession affect the way Hollywood *makes* movies?

To answer the first question: Very little. The box office for 2009 so far has been good — a bit over where it was this time last year — and science fiction and fantasy flicks have been a significant part of that. *Watchmen* has the top opening of 2009 so far with $55 million (although that's likely to be blown away this weekend by *Monsters vs. Aliens*), and other sf/f movies have been strong at the box office. Nicolas Cage's thriller *Knowing* was the surprise #1 picture last weekend, and the fantasy *Coraline* has had tremendous legs, in part thanks to its 3D (see page 227, Two Basic Rules for Headline Tree Sci Fi in 3D). This is not to say the genre hasn't already had its flops in 2009 — *Inkheart*, anyone? — but overall it's accounted for a significant portion of the box office and will continue to do so well through the summer, when *Star Trek* and *Harry Potter* and the *Terminator* show up to take your money.

The resiliency of the movie box office during a recession isn't that much of a surprise. It's a traditional Hollywood shibboleth that recessions are good for movies, since movies are a relatively cheap entertainment option and people are motivated to escape their worries for a couple hours of laughter and/or special effects. Indeed, when your top movie so far is *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, you can't say this is the year for thoughtful, serious pictures. It's pretty clear people are going to the movies to forget about the real world — a positive for science fiction.

The second half of the question is a little more difficult to answer, in part because Hollywood plans and finances its movies well in advance of their release dates, so any effect the economy has on the film industry won't show up on the actual movie screen until months or even years after. The flicks you'll see in the theaters today were greenlit two or more years ago, back before AIG and and the Dow losing 50% of its value. The true movies of the recession won't show up until next year at the earliest.

But that's not to say changes aren't coming. This *New York Times* article about how movie stars and dealmakers are "tightening up" gives an indication of the belt-tightening that's going on in Hollywood. A lot of stars, directors and producers who used to have production deals will find themselves without, and a lot of talent, both above and below the line, is going to have to accept getting paid less or working less. Speaking strictly from a "bottom line" point of view,

this is not a horrible thing for studios because a significant portion of these production deals are not especially productive. Speaking from the point of view of the key grip who won't be working for six or nine months out of 2009, though, it sucks pretty hard.

What moviegoers might notice is that the major studios may release fewer movies, opening the market up to smaller players. We're seeing that already. *Knowing*, for example, was released not by a major studio but by Summit Entertainment, a newer production house which recently scored big with *Twilight*, and also had the moderately successful flick *Push*. Smaller production companies put together pictures on tighter budgets (the production budgets for *Twilight*, *Push* and *Knowing* combined were $ 30 million, which happens to be the budget for *Watchmen* from Warner Bros., which can be an advantage in a market like this.

Overall, I expect science fiction and fantasy will ride out the recession pretty well. They're escapist fun, they're a proven draw at the box office and they scale so that both major studios and smaller players can make decent flicks. Economically these are not the best of times, but fans of the genre can take comfort that for scifi, it won't be the worst of times either.

—March 26, 2009 Next 93, Previous 11

SciFi Movies Made Money Before *Star Wars*, Too

Here's a fun question I received:

> Did science fiction films do well financially before *Star Wars*? It seems like that's when Hollywood realized scifi was big business.

Well, to be sure, no one had ever seen a science fiction movie do business like *Star Wars* did. It made $300 million in its original release in 1977, back when the average ticket price was $2.23, as opposed to the $7.18 it is today. Adjusted for inflation, its domestic box office is more than $1.2 billion over several releases (as discussed previously here (page 49, With *Star Wars* Soon In 3D, George Lucas Goes for Indomitability)). It's fair to say *Star Wars* got Hollywood's attention.

However, it's *not* fair to say that Hollywood never saw science fiction as a moneymaker before *Star Wars*, either. Quite a number of science fiction movies did gangbuster business from the very start of the industry. The highest grossing film of 1916, for example, was a version of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. That movie made $8 million at the box office, which adjusts to about $160 million today—a nice sized hit in any year. For additional perspective, here are the adjusted domestic grosses of several pre *Star Wars* movies:

***Frankenstein* (1931):** The classic Universal horror science fiction flick was the number one box office hit in 1931, with a $12 million gross. Of course, in the days of the Great Depression, the cost of a ticket was less than a quarter—23 cents, to be exact. So adjusting for inflation, *Frankenstein* raked in the equivalent of close to $375 million, which is a hit of historic proportions. No wonder Universal then cranked out a whole bunch of other monster movies in rapid succession.

***Destination Moon* (1950):** This movie, written by Robert Heinlein, was one of the first to attempt a realistic portrayal of men trying to get to the moon—"realistic" here making allowances for the relatively primitive special effects of the time, mind you. It made $5 million, which comes out to just under $70 million today, or in the neighborhood of last year's remake of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, which made $80 million.

***On the Beach* (1959):** One of earliest movies to use a science fiction premise (nuclear apocalypse! Everybody dies!) without actually advertising itself as science fiction—because Gregory Peck couldn't possibly be in a science fiction movie, you see. Be that as it may, not only was the picture lauded for its intelligent portrayal of people dealing with the end of life as we know it, it also brought in the equivalent of close to $140 million. It will be interesting to see if

The Road, a similarly themed post-apocalyptic flick also not advertising itself as science fiction, comes close to these numbers when it's released later this year.

***Planet of the Apes* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968):** Prior to *Star Wars*, this was science fiction's one two punch at the box office, and it was a pretty hefty combination. *Planet of the Apes*, helped by the star power of Charlton Heston, brought in $33 million (equivalent to $175 million today, and a sum no one would complain about). *2001*, with its groundbreaking special effects and oh so serious weirdness, did even better: $56 million, or just over $300 million today, which would have put it at number four in last year's box office list, just below the latest *Indiana Jones* flick. The two movies in fact helped spur a series of largely dystopic, serious-minded science fiction flicks, such as *Silent Running* and *Soylent Green*, not to mention, in the case of *Apes*, a bunch of sequels.

***Logan's Run* (1976):** Really the last major science fiction movie before *Star Wars* hit, this one closes out the era that began with *Apes* and *2001*. And how does it do in the box office? $26 million, which comes to about $87 million today. Not a blockbuster, but since it made three times what it cost to make it was still a nicely profitable little flick that no one would complain about.

Which is to say that, even before *Star Wars*, science fiction was adding nicely to Hollywood's bottom line and even occasionally dropping a blockbuster or two. In other words, the force is strong with this genre.

—May 21, 2009 *Next 17, Previous 229*

SNL Actors Plus SciFi Movies Equals Box Office Death

A couple of weeks ago (see page 123) Box Office Predictions for *Wolverine*, *Trek* and a Summer of SciFi I wrote about *Land of the Lost*, arguing that it "has the potential to become this year's *Speed Racer*." Boy was I right. Its $18.8 million opening weekend almost exactly matches the $18.5 million *Speed* made last year, which means—surprise!—Ferrell's prehistoric comedy will probably go down as the summer's first big flop. My condolences to Will Ferrell, Sid and Marty Krofft, and to sleestak lovers everywhere.

That said, Ferrell's science fiction belly flop shouldn't come as a huge surprise. History has shown us that when you combine *Saturday Night Live* alumni with science fiction cinema, what you often—indeed *usually*—get is a big fat flop. Truly, sci-fi and *SNL* are two great tastes that go absolutely horribly together. "Evidence!" you demand. I live to serve.

Eddie Murphy: Murphy actually has two science fictiony hits in *The Nutty Professor* and its sequel, both of which raked in about $125 million at the box office. But no amount of Buddy Love can ever mask the stench of *The Adventure of Pluto Nash*, which cost $100 million to make and grossed $4.4 million in the theaters, making it one of the biggest flops in the history of cinema. Really, it's a benchmark. And though you would like to, don't forget *Meet Dave*: $11 million box office for a $60 million flick—not a benchmark, but still bad.

Bill Murray: Yes, Bill Murray has *Ghostbusters*. But I would argue that, unlicensed nuclear accelerators aside, *Ghostbusters* is a fantasy movie (your hint: They chase *ghosts*). And before you say it, *Groundhog Day* is fantasy too. Murray's major foray into sci-fi was last year's *City of Ember*—$17.8 million box office on a $55 million budget. The animated movie *Osmosis Jones* is vaguely science fictional as well, with Murray's cells and medicine fighting viruses, but audiences were allergic: It made just $13 million.

Dan Aykroyd: Aykroyd's major sci-fare is *Coneheads*, also starring *SNL* alum Jane Curtin, one of the spate of flicks that came out in the '90s capitalizing on *Saturday Night* sketches. And like most (I hope you've forgotten *Wayne's World*), it performed only modestly at the box office, raking in $21 million. Aykroyd had only a bit part in *Evolution*, but that potential summer hit underperformed as well, dragging in under $40 million.

Jon Lovitz: Remember Lovitz's immortal turn as Emperor Todd Spengo in *Mom and Dad Save the World*? No? Not surprising, since its box office was just a shade above $2 million—that's right, even less than *Pluto Nash*! (Less expensive though.) His roles in *The Stepford Wives* and *Southland Tales* don't fare any to the "hit" side of his filmography either.

Chevy Chase: *Saturday Night Live*'s first breakout star has only one science fiction flick to his name—probably because it was a flop. *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* brought in only $34 million in box office, becoming a loser both for him and for director John Carpenter.

Rob Schneider: Rob Schneider landed himself the sidekick role in Sylvester Stallone's *Judge Dredd* and was probably kicking himself afterward. It made $34 million against a $90 million budget. But I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Do any *Saturday Night Live* alums do well in science fiction? Well, there is one I can think of off the top of my head, but he's not generally remembered as being an SNL performer: Robert Downey Jr., who did his time on the show during its disastrous 1985 season. You may have heard of his little movie called *Iron Man*, which brought in $300 million or so. Adam Sandler might qualify if you consider *Click* to be sci-fi, which I don't (it's a *magic* remote control, not a science fictional one). Likewise Billy Crystal if you tip *Monsters, Inc.* more as sci-fi than fantasy—it's a little straddler, to be sure. Some might contend the *Austin Powers* movies count, but I think they're clearly James Bond spoofs, so I'd disqualify Mike Myers.

No matter how you slice it, the tally of successful sci-fi movies movies starring SNL alums is dwarfed by the number that have fallen flat on their face. Part of this goes back to the simple issue that comedy and science fiction are a difficult squeeze together. Nevertheless, if I were a producer and someone said to me, "We've got a great science fiction movie with this SNL alum attached," I would have to pass, thanks all the same.

—June 11, 2009 *Next 97, Previous 95*

When Science Fiction Goes Global at the Foreign Box Office

Here's a question for you. Which is the bigger summer science fiction hit: *Star Trek* or *Terminator Salvation*?

Well, that's easy, you say, gazing at the box office figures. *Star Trek* had a $75 million opening weekend and has made $250 million at the box office so far, while the *Terminator* flick had a $42 million opening and has made just under $125 million—half of *Star Trek*'s haul. So *Star Trek*.

That's very logical of you. You are correct. But what if I told you there was an alternate universe in which it was *Terminator Salvation* that had grossed $230 million at the box office while *Star Trek* managed a mere $125 million?

Why, that's madness! you'd no doubt say. Do the stars of each movie in this alternate universe also wear *sinister goatees*? No, they don't. The stars looks the same, act the same, and even sound the same—that is, as long as the movie has subtitles instead of being dubbed. Because this alternate universe I am speaking of is the rest of the world. Welcome, friends, to the Foreign Box Office.

Decades ago the international market was a bit of an afterthought for Hollywood compared to its primary domestic market (the U.S. and Canada). These days, however, foreign markets are just as important—and as we see in the case of *Terminator*, can actually change the box office math, turning a minor financial disappointment into a bona fide hit. In the U.S. and Canada, *Star Trek* has made over $25 million more than *Terminator*, but when you add in the rest of the world, the box office difference between the two is just $22 million ($378 million for *Trek*, $356 million for *Terminator*). Which is the more successful film really just depends on what country you're standing in.

The foreign box office doesn't just equalize—it can actually save a flick's bacon. Take, if you will, *Dragonball: Evolution*, which was a big fat flop here in the domestic market, grossing $9.3 million. For a picture that cost $45 million to make, that's very bad news. But internationally, the movie rolled up over $48 million for a total worldwide gross of $57 million. This is no blockbuster gross, but it doesn't entirely stink. At the end of the day, when DVDs and rentals and cable showings and such are tallied up, it'll probably squeak into the black. And what does that mean? *Dragonball 2: Return* is currently scheduled for 2011.

There are also movies that are monster hits without the help of the domestic box office. As we speak, there's one that has grossed $182 million internationally—a sum that would put it at number six on the domestic box office for 2009—without having made a penny here at home. That would be *Ponyo*, the latest fantasy flick by Japanese animation icon Hayao Miyazaki. The movie is scheduled for release domestically in August, but is unlikely to make a significant sum. Miyazaki's most successful here, 2001's Oscar-winning *Spirited Away*, made just $10 million while earning $265 million abroad. Indeed

Miyazaki's last four pictures combined have grossed nearly $850 million, of which just $17 million was banked here in the U.S. and Canada.

That said, Miyazaki illustrates a salient point for foreign box office. It's not evenly distributed. Of *Ponyo*'s $182 million gross, more than $160 million of it is in Japan—the director's home territory. To go back to *Star Trek* and *Terminator*, *Trek*'s best overseas markets were the U.K., Australia and Germany—markets similar to the U.S.'s where *Trek* has a successful track record on TV. Meanwhile, *Terminator* did its best business in Japan and South Korea—two gadget-obsessed cultures who, frankly, are probably closer to a Skynet sort of situation than the rest of us are. Only one movie this summer, in fact, has been an evenly distributed smash, and if you guessed that it was *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, you may congratulate yourself or weep, depending on your inclinations).

Why mention all of this? Well, so that when *Terminator 5* rolls onto movie screens in a couple of years, along with the next *Star Trek* and *Transformers* installments, you won't be standing there going, "Wait, I thought the last one didn't do well." It did do well. You just have to look at it globally.

—July 23, 2009 Next 319, Previous 61

Spider-Man, 3D Box Office and *Blade II*—John Scalzi's Mailbag Returns!

Slow scifi movie week + Cabin fever because of piles of snow + Interesting questions in e-mail = Mailbag!

First question:

> *Avatar*'s domestic box office overtook *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* last weekend to make it the number one movie of 2009, but I think *Avatar* cheated because it gets extra money from 3D screenings. How much would *Avatar* made if its ticket prices were the same as *Transformers*'s?

This is an interesting question, actually. The estimates I've seen have 3D screenings being anywhere from 70 to 80 percent of *Avatar*'s take, and other estimates I've seen have 3D tickets running 20 to 30 percent more expensive than regular movie tickets. So, for the sake of argument, let's say that 75 percent of *Avatar*'s box office take is from 3D showings and that the tickets for these are 25 percent more expensive than regular tickets.

As of last Monday, *Avatar*'s domestic take was $431 million, so about $323.25 million of that was from 3D showings. Lopping off a quarter of that gross gets you to $242.44 million. Add back in the 25% which were 2D showings and you get a total of about $354 million. Which is less than *Transformers: ROTF*'s $402 million.

Now, this is a *very* back of the envelope sort of number crunching. I leave it to people with more accurate numbers to fine tune them. But I feel comfortable saying that *Avatar* is at the top of the domestic box office because of 3D surcharges, not because more people in North America saw it in theaters than saw *Transformers*.

That is, *so far*. Because here's the other thing: *Avatar*'s weekend box office declines have been amazingly shallow: 2 percent, 10 percent and 28 percent so far, especially in an era in which steep declines are the norm. *Transformers*'s second weekend was down 61 percent from its first. *Avatar* will almost certainly top $500 million domestically and might even topple *The Dark Knight* as the No. 2 domestic movie of all time. I think it's fairly safe to say that within the next couple of weeks *Avatar* will be the top movie of the last year, no matter what.

Next:

> What are your thoughts about what's happening with the *Spider Man* franchise?

For those of you who don't know, the *Spider-Man* franchise will be rebooted with a new director and new stars after director Sam Raimi was reportedly unhappy with the script for *Spider Man 4* which was then pushed back and eventually overhauled completely.

On the one hand, I think this is probably for the best. *Spider-Man 3* was one more Spidey flick than was absolutely necessary and I think they took the franchise as far as it was going to go with Raimi and Tobey Maguire. Bringing in new people and a new approach is likely to be a good thing for the franchise in the long run.

On the other hand, I think implicit in the concept of a "reboot" is the idea that there's some time between the end of one franchise timeline and the start of another. Examples: *Star Trek* which lay fallow for seven years between *Nemesis* and last year's installment, and *Batman* which rested for eight years between *Batman & Robin* and *Batman Begins*. The only franchise that slides reinvention right on top of a previous one is the Bond franchise, but it's a special case (and besides, even then there was six year gap between *License to Kill* which almost killed the franchise and *Goldeneye* which revived it).

The point being: How can you miss Spider-Man if he won't go away? If Sony wants to rewind and reintroduce the franchise, they should probably let it rest for a bit, otherwise they risk either backlash or fatigue, especially since *Spider-Man 3* was the weakest of the series. Even 2012 the current new release date may be too soon. Of course, that's asking a movie studio to delay a potential payday of hundreds of millions of dollars, and I don't see that happening.

Final question:

> *Blade II* in your Best Sci-fi of the Decade list (see page 137)? The Best Sci-Fi Movies of the '00s,' Over *Spider Man 2*? Or *Dark Knight*? Really?

Yeah, really. First, I've noted before that I think *Dark Knight* isn't science fiction (see page 113). Is *The Dark Knight* Oscar Ready? Although it's closely related. So it's not eligible for the list, although I think it's probably the best example of franchise entertainment of the decade. Second, other people liked *Spider-Man 2* more than I did. I thought it was good but ultimately it didn't wow me. *Blade II* wowed me. I think in no small part because it's so much smarter and moodier than the other installments in its series that it made me rethink my general take on comic book movies. Now, obviously, your mileage may vary on this, and I'm OK with that. But that's my opinion and I'm sticking to it.

—January 14, 2010 Next 251, Previous 141

Answering Your Questions About Iron Man 2

Iron Man 2 is soon to be upon us, and as luck would have it I have two *Iron Man 2* related reader questions to answer this week. I love it when that happens!

First question:

> There's not much question that *Iron Man 2* is going to have a very strong opening weekend. But do you think it would have done even better if it had been released in 3D?

The obvious answer to that would be, of course, 3D movie tickets are offered at a premium (usually $3 extra per ticket over 2D film tickets—and so you could just tack on that extra amount to the gross and roll it over, week in and week out and watch *Iron Man 2* rocket its way to box office glory. But I don't think the obvious answer applies here. And that's because I think moviegoers are getting smarter about 3D, thanks to *Clash of the Titans* and the uproar that was made about its hastily produced and ultimately pretty crappy 3D conversion (and the resulting spate of articles about it). Moreover, the moviegoers who are particularly smart about 3D at this point are the fanboys—i.e., the fervent fans who pack the theaters on opening weekend.

So (imagine you're a fanboy; some of us don't have to work too hard on this) you're all excited about seeing *Iron Man 2*, and then you hear that just before its release, the film is rushed into a computer lab and fiddled with a bit so the movie studio can charge you extra for *oooooo 3D!* Which you know means a) the 3D effects won't actually be very good; b) the colors will be muted because of the glasses you have to wear; or) the studio releasing the film figures you're dumb enough to ignore both of these. Does this make you more likely to see the film opening weekend? Or less?

At this point, I suspect the fanboy answer is "less," and I suspect Paramount (IM2's studio) knows this. Paramount also knows that even in its current, demonstrably unmotivated state, *Iron Man 2* is going to have a huge opening weekend. (Heck, it's already *had* a $128 million opening weekend, since it was released internationally last weekend. So really, why mess with a good thing?)

This isn't to say the inevitable *Iron Man 3* won't be in 3D. It almost certainly will be. But at least then the film will be able to be designed and shot in 3D, and that will make a significant difference. And in the meantime, I'm going to predict that *Iron Man 2*'s ultimately going to roll in something between $700 and $800 million worldwide, which is a nice little sum no matter how many dimensions you look at it in.

Second question:

> You're a science fiction writer and movie fan, do you think that comic book films like *Iron Man 2* and fantasy films are crowding out science fiction films? You noted last week how few science fiction films there are this summer.

It's true there are fewer sci-fi films this summer than last summer, but I don't think that means much of anything in the larger picture. First, I don't think that studios make the same sort of fine-grained distinctions that we geeks and nerds do about these things. *Iron Man 2* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Star Trek* are all in the same very general category of effects-laden action blockbuster rather than 'comic book movie' 'fantasy movie' and 'science fiction movie' respectively. In that sense, this summer is just as dense with effects-laden action blockbusters as last year's was (and of course there's some cross-pollination. *Iron Man 2* is a science fictional comic book movie).

One reason I think that studios don't make that sort of fine-grained distinction is because they don't have to. The opening weekend audience for *Iron Man 2* is pretty much the opening weekend audience for *Transformers*, is pretty much the opening weekend audience for *Harry Potter*. Some of the hardcore audience may be different (I have suspicions that the most fervent of Potterites might see a *Transformers* diehard as the very worst sort of muggle, for example), but the larger mass of the audience are the folks who come out for all the PG-13 eye-popping popcorn shovelers. I don't think there's a thing wrong with that, when I go to the movies in the summer I'm one of those folks myself.

That said, it will not have escaped notice that six of the top fifteen highest grossing films of 2009 were science fiction films, and that last year was the first year that the domestic box office topped $10 billion in grosses. So it's a reasonably good bet that even as we chat about this Hollywood is developing a raft of sci-fi flavored effects-laden action blockbusters to ready for release two or three years down the line (they, these things take time).

So I wouldn't worry too much about science fiction films going the way of the western, at least not the science fiction films of the sort that movie studios use as tent poles to prop up their summer season.

—May 5, 2010 *Next 265, Previous 149*

Eye-popping Movie-Ticket Prices, Now in 3D!

Look out, kids. I'm going to complain about 3-D movies again. I know, I know. But I do have a point.

Last weekend, *Shrek Forever After* hit movie screens, and many of those screens were 3-D equipped—and expensive, since movie exhibitors have apparently decided that goosing up the ticket prices for 3-D films even higher is the way to go. In New York City, tickets to the IMAX 3-D outing of *Shrek* went as high as $20 this weekend. This was apparently an error, however, and by Sunday those theaters scaled back the price to $19. Other IMAX theaters elsewhere in the U.S. were charging $15 and $17 a pop.

The new installment of the Shrek series garnered over $71 million in weekend box office. This would be great for any normal film but is an underpowered performance for the ogre whose last two films debuted with $100 million weekends, without the benefit of 3-D ticket prices. Some of that underperformance no doubt has to do with its immediate predecessor, *Shrek the Third*, being not so great, but I'm going to hazard a guess here that another contributing factor was parents seeing the ticket prices, realizing that a family of four could be shelling out between $60 and $80 even before getting worked over at the concession counter, and saying, "You know what? We'll wait for the DVD."

Movies are still one of the cheapest ways to entertain yourself out of your own home—cheaper, typically, than a music concert or a sporting event—and in economic times such as ours, this is not insignificant. Being able to get out of your house and go on a date or take your family on an outing makes us feel good. Hollywood knows this; the film industry is superficially about glitz and glamor and big stars weaving in and out of expensive explosions, but its core economic engine is its value proposition, as it has been since at least the Great Depression, when a nickel got you a cartoon, newsreel, B movie, and the main feature.

Being the cheap entertainment outside the home has a flip side, however: the closer a film ticket comes to the prices of every other thing, the less of a case it makes for itself. Movie studios and movie theaters in the U.S. are clearly flirting with the idea of a $20 movie ticket in some shape or form. I think that's dangerous territory for flirting. It's one thing to have a superspecialized movie theater for people with too much money, in which a $20 (or so) ticket gets you dinner, waitstaff, and a high-end recliner to sink into while you watch your 3-D extravaganza. It's another thing to expect people without too much money to pony up the same sort of cash for a standard seat, even at a big IMAX screen.

Now, I live in a part of the country where I can pay the 3-D surcharge and still get into the movie theater for under $10, depending on the time of day, so perhaps I'm biased about these things. But I think that, no matter what, if you're getting to the point where the 3-D surcharge for a ticket is almost a third of the ticket price ($3 on a $10 ticket, in other words), people are going to start feeling as if they're being taken advantage of. That's going to color their impres-

sion not only of the immediate film under discussion but of all future 3-D films as well. People are going to ask if 50 percent more dimensionality in a film is worth paying up to 100 percent more for.

That said, there is an alternate theory for 3-D film opening grosses. We've already seen two examples of 3-D films with less than-anticipated opening weekend box office do well over time. One of them was fellow DreamWorks film *How to Train Your Dragon*, which opened with a relatively modest $43 million but is currently the number three film of the year, with $210 million domestically. The other is *Avatar*, whose initial $77 million weekend some saw as troubling but which, as we all know, ended up doing okay. It may be that (successful) 3-D films have a different box office dynamic than most other current blockbusters—opening with soft first weekend numbers but exhibiting staying power in the long run. Will *Shrek*'s $71 million opening follow the same path? We'll have a better idea when we see its second-weekend numbers.

But in the meantime, a note to Hollywood and to the movie theaters: think hard about about how high you want to price those 3-D tickets. There are lots of ways to kill the golden 3-D goose, and this looks like one of them to me.

—May 26, 2010 *Next 267, Previous 331*

The Dollar Value of Nerd Love (Here's Looking at You, Scott Pilgrim)

One of the interesting side effects of this particular gig is that I have become a go to source for people who want a little hand holding when a film they love isn't loved as much by others. To wit, this plaintive e-mail last night from a friend:

> Explain to me why *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, which is awesome, made $10 million last weekend, and *The Expendables*, which I cannot think about without fury, made $35 million. I don't usually complain that life's not fair, but COME ON.

Scott Pilgrim isn't really science fiction—it has some glancing science-fictional elements and is probably best described as postmodern hipster-nerd fantasy—but it's close enough, in its core audience, that I feel comfortable talking about it and using it to make a particular point.

First: whatever my friend's rage about *The Expendables*, he shouldn't think that it actually took audience from *Scott Pilgrim*. *The Expendables* was always going to make its $35 million, because there are enough aging guys out there with enough fond memories of the action movies of the eighties that they weren't going to be able to resist an economy size exploding bucket filled with Stallone, Willis, Schwarzenegger, Dolph Lundgren, and Mickey Rourke. *The Expendables* is very much the cinematic equivalent of a Kiss concert: all the greatest hits played loud enough that the audience can ignore the fact that their T-shirts are now too tight across their guts. It's not the same core audience, really, as *Scott Pilgrim*.

Which begs this question: what is the core audience of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*? Well, when I saw it this weekend, the members of the audience were mostly under 30 and visually equally distributed between stereotypical nerds and stereotypical hipsters. There were enough snarky T-shirts and chunky black frame glasses to fill a coffee shop next to an Apple store.

But only enough of them to fill that one coffee shop—and this is the problem, commercially speaking. Nerds and hipsters love what they love, and, while they love it, they love it with the white hot intensity of a thousand obsessive compulsive suns (and when they stop loving it, they hate you for still loving it, but that's another column entirely). But hipsters and nerds—and the occasional hipster nerds—aren't in themselves a big enough audience to move the box-office needle any appreciable distance.

In fact, I strongly believe that nerd-hipster love has a more or less quantifiable value for films: $10 million dollars on opening weekend, or, as it happens, just about exactly what *Scott Pilgrim* made last weekend.

Other examples, all coincidentally starting with the letter "s"

Serenity: This science fiction film, based on the short-lived *Firefly* series beloved of science fiction geeks, got $10 million on opening weekend, on the way to a $25.5 million domestic gross.

Snakes on a Plane: The Internet went crazy for the idea of this film (Samuel L. Jackson! And Snakes! On a plane!), but when opening weekend rolled around, all that ironic Internet love only pumped out $15.8 million on the first weekend and $34 million domestically.

Stardust: Author Neil Gaiman has one of the most fervent fan bases of any living writer (on a side of J.K. Rowling, but this 2007 adaptation of his popular novel debuted with $9.1 million on opening weekend, on the way to a $38 million gross in North America. It did rather better overseas, racking up $100 million in the rest of the world.)

Splice: This summer's science fiction horror film generated a lot of buzz on geek sites like io9.com and Wired News, and director Vincenzo Natali has the cult sci-fi film *Cube* as his calling card and is attached to direct *Neuromancer*, based on the seminal science fiction novel by William Gibson. All that geek cred translated to $7.1 million on opening weekend and $17 million overall.

Bear in mind that none of this has to do with the quality of these films. I'm quite fond of *Serenity* and *Stardust* and had a ton of fun watching *Scott Pilgrim* and would heartily encourage you to see it if you haven't. Nor is the point here that having the Comic Con crowd love your film means you have the commercial kiss of death hanging about your neck. Heck, *The Expendables* was trotted out at Comic Con, and it did fine, obviously. But if all you have is the Comic Con crowd and the Internet loving your film, you may be screwed. Commercially speaking, there's not enough there, there.

More to the point, if I were a movie director and my marketing people were telling me their big plan was to generate a huge wave of publicity with Internet tastemakers and the Comic Con crowd and ride that wave right into the opening weekend, I'd get on the phone to my agent and grab the next directing gig I could, before the wipeout of my $10 mill on opening.

—August 18, 2010 *Next 151, Previous 343*

Sequels, Remakes, and *Transformers* in 3D—A December Mailbag

The weather outside is frightful, but your movie questions are delightful, and, since I've no place to go, into the electronic mailbag I go.

First question:

> Is it my imagination, or was this year even more re-tread and sequel happy than usual?

It isn't entirely your imagination, no. The top ten films of 2010 are unlikely to change before the end of the year—especially in this doldrums holiday film season—and seven of the ten are sequels or remakes: *Toy Story 3*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Iron Man 2*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, *Shrek Forever After*, and *The Karate Kid*. Of the three remaining, two are animated films (*Despicable Me* and *How to Train Your Dragon*) and one is *Inception*—which makes it the one non-sequel, adult-oriented film in the entire top ten. It also happens to be science fiction, which is nice for this column. (The science-fiction and fantasy content of the top films of the year will be the subject of a column very soon.)

How does seven sequels or remakes in the top ten compare with previous years? In 2009, six of the top ten films were sequels or remakes; in 2008, four were; in 2007, it was seven; in 2006, it was five. Seven sequels or remakes is pretty solid for the year. (If *Iron Man 2* makes more than $170 million in its theatrical run and displaces *The Karate Kid*, as the top-ten list, we just replace one remake with a sequel.)

What I think may be slightly more informative is to look at how many films in 2010 have made $100 million so far—the amount generally considered to be a blockbuster movie gross (although $100 million isn't what it used to be)—and see how many of them are remakes or sequels. In 2010 so far, 22 films made more than $100 million, and, of those only 10 are remakes or sequels (the other three being *Clash of the Titans*, *Jackass 3D*, and *Robin Hood*). *Iron Man 2* will likely add another sequel to that pile, but that'll still be only half of the list.

What this tells us is that, yes, at the highest reaches of the box office sequels and remakes are what pass as safe bets in Hollywood, which is why they won't be going anywhere anytime soon. But there's still room near the top of the food chain for newer material, which in time will, of course, very likely spawn its own set of sequels. Because any movie that's a hit once is likely to be a hit twice and then a third time, in 3-D.

Which brings us to the next question:

> Earlier in the year you praised Michael Bay for his negative position on 3D films, but now that the first trailer for the next Transformers film is out we know it's going to be in 3D. Are you hurt? Betrayed?

Well, you know, Michael Bay doesn't answer to me; he answers to his overlords at Paramount Pictures. Yes, even Michael Bay has overlords. His overlords apparently crave the extra box office jolt that 3-D tickets can bring. If Michael Bay annoys me, he's cut the price of a movie ticket. If he annoys his bosses, he's cut the several million dollars he makes as a director of very loud films. Trust me, he can sleep at night knowing he's annoyed me.

That said, recent interviews he's given on the subject of 3-D films suggests that he's approaching the 3-D process in a non-stupid fashion. He's using 3-D cameras when he can (while admitting the physical limitations of the cameras, which means some of the film will converted from 2-D), and he's also changing his shooting style to incorporate more wide shots and to presumably keep his audience's eyeballs from exploding from all the focus shifting that 3-D would require from his trademark fast cuts.

Whether this amounts to anything remains to be seen—after all, what does "non-stupid" mean when applied to a Michael Bay film? But snark aside, I think Bay is extremely proficient on the technical side of filmmaking and is also invested in making his films visually effective. I do actually have some faith that if Bay is going to make the leap to 3-D he'll do it on his terms and that his terms might not be all that bad. Doesn't make me any more excited to see the next Transformers film, mind you. But at least now I hope my corneas won't pop right off my eyeballs.

—December 15, 2010 Next 159, Previous 283

Why *I Am Number Four* Wasn't Number One

Here's a timely e-mailed question:

> *I Am Number Four* was 20th's first big science fiction release and was expected to win the weekend box office—and didn't. Why not, and what does it mean?

Indeed, *I Am Number Four* ended up saying "I am number three" for the extended Presidents' Day weekend box office, with about $22.6 million in box office behind *Gnomeo & Juliet* ($24.8 million) and *Unknown* ($25.6 million). In itself, $22.6 million is not a horrible opening for a film that cost $60 million to make, but the filmmakers were hoping it would be the start of a beautiful franchise for them. Barring direct-to-home-video sequels, that doesn't seem likely now.

So how did this happen? Here are three reasons.

First—and one would like to think, primarily—it doesn't appear that it was particularly good. The film got an aggregate 36 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes, with most reviews calling it an ersatz *Twilight*, with the hot sparkly vampires replaced by studly aliens with lasers in their palms. (This will be important later.) A bad Rotten Tomatoes rating doesn't automatically mean box office failure, particularly for science fiction. Case in point: *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, which had a 20 percent rating and a $400 million box office haul. But when you're attempting to start a new franchise from scratch and you don't have built-in name recognition, it certainly doesn't help.

But some of the more book-savvy of you say, "Wasn't the film based on a best-selling series of young adult books? And wouldn't those readers come to see the film, just like the *Twilight*-ers came to see the filmed version of that book series? Isn't there built-in recognition there?" Well, in this case, not really. Yes, the movie was based on a young adult novel of the same title (the presumed first in a series—but the story was optioned and the movie machinery began running even before the book was out the door. And while the book has done fine in the market, hitting the *New York Times*' young-adult best-seller list, it hasn't sold in the huge volume that the *Twilight* or *Harry Potter* series did. As a result, the film had a much smaller presell market.

Ultimately, the filmmakers might have been better off waiting a couple of years for the book series to take off and build its numbers before bringing their film to production—and if it didn't build its numbers, to cut their losses and move on. Remember that both *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* were several books into their series before the movies were released.

A third reason the film didn't win its weekend is the same reason lots of films don't win their weekends: the competition. *I Am Number Four* was up against *Unknown*, which starred Liam Neeson and was an action film similar to his surprise hit *Taken*, from two years ago, which eventually pulled in $145 million at

the box office. For some reason, chart watchers seemed surprised Neeson would pull in similar numbers in a similar film at a similar time of the year. Surprise: he did. Add in the holdover family business to the animated *Gnomeo & Juliet* and there was enough going on to keep *Number Four* at number three on the box-office chart. In a fair world, where you were on the chart wouldn't matter if you made enough money, but, as any marketer will tell you, it's hard to argue with being the number one movie at the box office.

What does *Number Four*'s lackluster debut mean for science fiction in 2011? My guess is not a whole lot. *I Am Number Four* was science fiction in its content—aliens, you know—but it was aimed at and marketed to the *Twilight* and young adult crowd and much less to the traditional science-fiction crowd of young men and adults. Those two markets are more squarely in the sights of the next two big science fiction films of the year: *The Adjustment Bureau* on March 4, starring Matt Damon and Emily Blunt, which is positioning itself as a high-end *Inception*, and the invasion film *Battle: Los Angeles*, which is a straight-up *Independence Day*-style action adventure on March 11. Consequently, I think those two films might be a better test of the science-fiction audience. If both of those movies fall on their heads, then we can start wondering what's going on in science fiction in 2011.

In the meantime, I suspect the filmmakers who should really be worried about *Number Four*'s box office numbers are those whose upcoming films are also aiming for the *Twilight* crowd, including *Beastly* (which also stars *Number Four*'s lead Alex Pettyfer) and *Red Riding Hood*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, who directed the first film in the *Twilight* series. The first of the films aimed at these audiences just came out, and the audiences didn't come out in droves to see it. Hollywood executives are probably hoping this is a blip and not a trend.

—February 23, 2011 Next 165, Previous 291

Mars Needs Moms, Invasions Revisited, and SciFi March— It's Mailbag Time!

My mailbag is unusually heavy this week with science-fiction-film-related questions. Thank you, readers, for making this gig easy!

First question:

> *Mars Needs Moms* looks like it's flopped. What went wrong there? I thought science fiction animation was doing decently these days.

For those who need context, the Disney animated film *Mars Needs Moms*[1] clocked in with just $6.8 million in box office for its opening weekend, it's especially bad when you consider that Box Office Mojo estimates the production for the film cost $150 million. It's a flop.

So what went wrong? Well, I can point to a lot of things, but I'm going to highlight one big thing, which is that this film is an adventure story designed to appeal to young boys called *Mars Needs Moms*. Because what 8-to-12 year old boys really want in an animated adventure movie is to be reminded of how much they need their mommies. I'm rather some distance away from being an 8 to 12 year old boy myself, but when I reach back into the recesses of my memories of the time, pretty much the only way I would've gone to see a movie with that title was if I were dragged to it by, like, my grandmother. Because that's what grandmothers do. And if I saw that any of my friends were at the movie theater when I was there, I would have lied and told them I was there to see *Battle: Los Angeles*[2] or at least *Rango*[3].

Disney is generally smarter than this marketing-wise—heck, it's got a film named *Gnomeo & Juliet* cruising toward a $100 million box office—so I'm kind of at a loss as to why they didn't figure this one out. This isn't only a title problem, but the title really is a big problem. We could spend a whole lot of time digging into the deeper issues of why 8 to 12 year old boys don't want to confront their dependence on their mothers, but that's probably best left for another column or at least the comments.

Next question.

> Last week you ranked alien invasions in your column. I'm just wondering, if you were going to do an alien invasion, how would you do it?

Are you asking how I would do it if I were making a movie about an alien invasion, or how I would do it if I were an actual alien? Because these are separate things. If I were making a movie, I would do it along the lines of *War of the*

Worlds or *Independence Day* or (yes) *Battle Los Angeles*, with the aliens on the ground and in the air shooting up things and generally making a mess. That's popcorn shoveling fun, and I don't turn my nose up at popcorn shoveling fun. It can be done poorly, sure. When it's done right, I'm happy.

If I were an actual alien wanting to invade the Earth, however, that sort of large scale invasion seems ill-advised, if for no other reason than that there are 6 billion humans on the Earth and most of them would be cranky about giving up the planet. So in that case, I would probably try for some *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*-like stealth. If the humans didn't know they were losing the planet, you wouldn't even have to fight them. That's very Sun Tzu, if you know what I mean.

Final question of the day:

> **Why are there so many science fiction films coming out now? Why not in the summer?**

It's true that every weekend in March has at least one science-fiction film released in it: first *The Adjustment Bureau*, then *Battle Los Angeles* and *Mars Needs Moms*, and then *Paul* and *Limitless* this weekend, followed by *Sucker Punch* on the 23rd and *Source Code* on April 1.

Why now and not in the summer? The short answer to this is that the studios have jammed the summer with what they hope are their sure bets: the sequels and comic book movies all of which they assume or hope already have built-in audiences. There are some science-fiction movies among them—*Green Lantern*, *Cowboys & Aliens* and the new Transformers flick stand out as examples—but their science fictional-ity is not really their primary selling point.

And this is fine. I don't think it's a particularly bad thing that we're getting a batch of science fiction in the spring: there's a bit less competition for theater space and more of a chance for a quirky film to get seen. A science-fiction comedy like *Paul* would get hammered (pun intended) if it went up against *Thor* or the new X-Men movie; likewise, a grown up science-fiction flick like *The Adjustment Bureau* wouldn't have a chance to catch second- or third-weekend viewers if it were up against *Green Lantern* one weekend, *Cars 2* the next, and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* the weekend after that.

Happily, *The Adjustment Bureau* and *Battle Los Angeles* seem to be doing just fine in their slots, hopefully the other science-fiction movies will too.

—March 16, 2011 Next 359, Previous 357

The Return of 3D—International Edition

It's the week after Memorial Day, and that means it's a fine time to check in with Hollywood's latest favorite moneymaking scheme, the 3-D movie. Last year at this time, as you may recall, there was some moral outrage when 3-D tickets for the final Shrek movie climbed as high as $20 in some places (see page 195, "Eye-popping Movie Ticket Prices. Now in 3D!")—while the film itself underperformed. This year, according to a hand-wringing article on 3-D in the New York *Times*, the numbers are in on several would-be summer blockbusters, and they're not encouraging. *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* and *Kung Fu Panda 2* saw less than half of their (relatively soft) domestic opening weekend grosses come from 3-D, which has typically been garnering about 60 percent of the grosses for "event" type films.

This is not good news for Hollywood, which has invested heavily in the 3-D process for big films this summer and has twice as many 3-D films this summer as it did last year, including what are (presumably) the final installments for both the Transformers and Harry Potter series. If 3-D doesn't offer the expected box office boost for these films, it's going to be a long summer for the movie studios, which have already been seeing domestic box-office and attendance declines this year and can no longer rely on home video sales to bail them out on the back end.

So does this mean that Hollywood will finally get the fact that 3-D is not a magical, mystical money-spinner? No! Because here's the thing: those 3-D declines are here, in the domestic market. Out in the rest of the world, 3-D seems to be humming along just fine. Case in point: *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, which, while tracking below previous editions of the series here in the U.S., has been a monster hit elsewhere in the world. So much so that in two weeks it has grossed almost as much worldwide ($634 million) as the first film of the series did in its entire run ($654 million). And of course much of that spectacular performance is due to 3-D showings, which, as in the U.S., are priced more than the traditional 2-D presentations.

Now Hollywood will be watching to see how the rest of the summer goes, not just here at home but internationally. If 3-D continues to be soft domestically but boffo overseas, then guess what? There are going to be more films than ever in the 3-D process because, at the end of the day, Hollywood makes its movies for wherever there's money to be made. And if that means making its movies for the tastes of people other than North Americans—well, that's not a hard choice to make, especially when the studios can just ship more 2-D versions to theaters at home.

That said, I think the chances are fairly high that studios might be taking home the wrong message from the overseas enthusiasm for 3-D. It's entirely possible that international markets may simply like 3-D more than domestic markets or, alternately, that the sort of films that do well internationally—effects laden, dialogue-light explode-athons—lend themselves to the 3-D process

But it's also possible that international markets, which are generally newer to the 3-D process than the home market are simply not as disillusioned with 3-D as North Americans are. They have yet to catch up with the idea that most films don't need 3-D and indeed some films are worse with it—darker, harder to see, and often manufactured by an inferior computer process after the fact rather than designed with the process in mind and shot with 3-D native equipment.

In which case, Hollywood isn't necessarily being smart with 3-D; it's merely postponing the inevitable. In a year or two, the rest of the world might catch up with us here at home and shrug at the idea of 3-D films in general, and Hollywood will be left scrambling for the next technological gimmick to get people into theaters.

Or, alternately, Hollywood could do something remarkable: learn from its mistakes and not just slap "3-D" onto every middling film it hopes to get a boost out of and instead make an effort to integrate the 3-D process into the films from the start. Make better 3-D films, in other words. The slapdash approach they took with 3-D has already messed with the domestic market, but it's not too late to keep the international market excited about the format—and, consequently, paying more money for it. Is that too much to hope for? Probably. But it's nice to think about nonetheless.

—June 1, 2011 Next 32, Previous 297

Thoughts About Everything

Now, Wait a Minute—
Nerdgassing About Science Fiction Movies

Recently I was thinking of that thing science fiction geeks do when they complain about science or continuity errors in books, movies and TV shows. Try as I might, I couldn't think of a specific term for it, so I made one up. Nerdgassing.

Here's how I first described the term on my blog:

Definition: The venting nerds emit when some (often minor) detail of a book/movie/TV show/comic book etc. either conflicts with canon and/or handwaves through some suspect science.
Example One: In the third show of the second season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Data clearly says that the Corinthian flagship was constructed in orbit around that planet Norgar, but then in the 15th show of the sixth season, it's said it was constructed in the Utrerian space docks. How do you explain that, hmmm?"*
Example Two: Ringworld is unstable! Ringworld is unstable!"

Secondary Definition: What happens after too many Cheetos and Mountain Dew.

(*Note that Example One is a fictionalization. "Corinthians" do not exist in the *Star Trek* universe, as far as I know. Don't nerdgas me about it.)

SciFi Movies: Nerdgassing Heaven: While any and all of science fiction media lends itself to nerdgassing, science fiction film in particular is a rich field for it, thanks to all the shortcuts and compromises filmmakers take with science and series continuity. In science fiction films, there's hardly a sci-fi movie that comes out that doesn't have hardcore geeks throwing up their hands in exasperation. And while on one hand the expression, "Dude, it's only a *movie*," is not a bad one to apply here (getting your science from Hollywood is just not smart), one thing to remember is that geeks like to nerdgas about this stuff. It gets them (oh hell, *us*) feel smug and superior for once. So all the rest of you: Let us have our fun.

To give you examples of nerdgassing in action, allow me to share with you two of my favorite nerdgassing moments in recent science fiction film. And as a warning: Some of these might be spoilery if you've not seen these films. (But honestly, if you haven't seen *these* films, why are you reading this column?)

1. *The Matrix:* The stock of this film has gone down, thanks to the film's slogtastic sequels, but for my money it's still one of the recent classics of the genre. For all that, there's one thing that always makes me yell at the screen: when Morpheus is explaining to Neo that the machines use human body heat as a

power source. What he actually says is that the machines use human body heat "combined with a form of fusion." Fusion, you know, being the form of nuclear energy released by the sun, and which both releases far more energy and is massively more energy efficient than sucking BTUs out of the human metabolism. Saying the Matrix runs on body heat and "a form of fusion" is like saying your car runs on a combination of body heat and "a form of internal combustion," since body heat is required to move your muscles to push down the accelerator pedal.

2. *The Phantom Menace:* *The Matrix* example is one where the "science" annoys the geeks. *The Phantom Menace* is an example of where continuity is messed with. The sins of George Lucas in *Phantom* are many, but chief among them is the sudden, pointless appearance of "midi-chlorians," tiny little creatures that channel the Force, the mystical life force of the *Star Wars* universe. In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the Force didn't need no stinkin' midi-chlorians to work, and no one thought to even hint that they existed — not even Obi-Wan Kenobi, who clearly would have known about them. Why didn't anyone mention them? Probably because George Lucas tacked them into the *Star Wars* universe at a later date, when he wrote his prequel trilogy, and decided he needed a "logical" explanation for the Force, and for the wholly unnecessary "virgin birth" of Anakin Skywalker (who we are to believe is birthed by the midi-chlorians themselves, because, you know, why not).

If you visit Wookieepedia, the Star Wars wiki, you'll find that folks have created an excuse for why midi-chlorians were never mentioned in the original trilogy. This is known as "retconning" — creating a retroactive continuity for the series to account for these discrepancies caused by someone not thinking about something in the real world until much later. *Star Wars* fans know all about retconning, since they've been doing it ever since they had to explain away why Han Solo says he ran the Kessel Run in 12 parsecs.

These are the things that make me whine and kvetch and, yes, nerdgasm. Because, yes, I am a geek. What things in science fiction film make you do the same thing?

—June 19, 2008 Next 3, Previous 303

The Look, Not the Idea, Makes a SciFi Movie

Let's talk about genre for a moment, shall we? Specifically, what is it that makes a film a *genre* film? The easy answer here is that something is a genre film if it has particular plot elements, or if it attracts a certain audience. So, for example, a movie is a "Western" if it takes place in the American Old West, or it's a "chick flick" if the audience it draws is primarily women. These definitions are fine as far as they go, but here's another definition of "genre film" which I think is more on point for where I want to go.

A movie that uses some *thing* as a crutch because it knows fans of that *thing* will wade through a lot of crap to get it.

The word "crutch" is essential here, because while lots of movies use genre settings or elements, they're using them as tools for the story rather than a crutch. For example, *The Exorcist* undeniably uses horror as a tool, but it doesn't merely stand pat on that. It's got characters, plot, sub plot, and a great story to go along with the pea soup vomit and Linda Blair's head twisting. It's a great horror movie, but its genre distinction is merely a subset of its being a great movie in general. You can say the same for *High Noon* (western), *Singin' in the Rain* (musical), *Platoon* (war movie), and so on. When a film is content to be a genre film, it doesn't automatically mean it's *bad*, it simply means that it relies on a crutch to get it through, and is not likely to have huge appeal to people who aren't already fans of the genre.

How Do SciFi Fans Get Their Fix?

This is all a rather lengthy set up to ask the question: What is the element in science fiction movies that fans are willing to wade through lots of crap to get? You might think it's *actual* science fiction—that's to say, stories of the future, in which technology (or, in the case of many post-apocalyptic SF films, the sudden lack of it) is key. But once again, I'm going to go off script and suggest that what SF film genre fans really want out of their science fiction is visual effects and design.

This should not, of course, be any surprise to anyone, because it's in the very DNA of the genre. I'm fond of pointing out that the very first science fiction movie, 1902's Georges Melies' *Le Voyage Dans La Lune*, was produced not out of the director's huge love for the stories of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (whose work he used as plot scaffolding), but because he wanted to show off the special effects processes that he'd developed. The entire point of the movie, in other words, were the nifty special effects. And the audiences of 1902 ate it right up.

Even the great films of the genre—the ones that have managed to jump the genre fence, as it were—are more about effects and design than story or characterization. The top four essential movies of the science fiction genre are case studies of this fact. *Metropolis*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, and *Blade Runner* are all great movies, but they're all definitely meant to be seen rather than heard. Close your eyes watching *Blade Runner* and you just have lots of

clunky faux-noir dialogue especially if you're watching the original theatrical release do the same with *Star Wars* and you'll have George Lucas in your ear and *THX* notwithstanding, that's really no good. *Metropolis* is a silent film, and *2001* might as well be. So if the getting very great movies of the genre need to rely on visual effects and design more than story, acting and dialogue, what chance do the mediocre and *bad* genre films have to get around it?

This is not necessarily a criticism. I should note, as a lover of science fiction film, I'm as much in the tank for nifty special effects as any genre fan might be. I am willing to tolerate a whole lot to get my visual fix. And I'm not even the worst supposedly responsible adult to feel this way—in 1998 Roger Ebert declared *Dark City* the best film of that year, because (in my opinion) he fell so much in love with the look and feel of the movie, he unlocked that place in his heart where he kept his inner 13 year-old boy and let that boy run free all around his brain. I like *Dark City* a whole lot and for many of the same reasons as Ebert—but best film of the year? Come on.

Good Movies That Don't Rely Only on Effects: To be sure, there are genuinely good science fiction movies which manage to get around the genre obsession for effects. Off the top of my head, *A Clockwork Orange* comes to mind (although you can't say it doesn't have a distinct visual look), and Godard's *Alphaville* which was almost perversely effects and design-free (the most impressive futuristic effect was a light bulb behind a fan). But at the end of the day, wherever science fiction genre fans come together to get their fix, the main ingredient of the fix is not the *idea* of science fiction, but the *look* of it.

—*September 18, 2008 Next 307 Previous 85*

Are Mad Scientists Unfairly Maligned?

I have something a little different for you today, folks. With Halloween coming up, a lot of horror-oriented science fiction films will be screened so that we can be spooked and scared on that creepiest of nights. But what if those films contained prejudices? Stereotypes? Unfair representations? Would it change the way you look at these films?

It just might. And with me today is someone who wants to fight against those stereotypes. Sir, please tell the folks at home who you are.

A: I am Dr. Hermann von Griebstein, public relations director for the International Society of Mad Scientists. I'm also occasionally the despot of Gorokaster, which *incorrect* maps will tell you is an Albanian province.

Q: Just occasionally?

A: It depends on whether my terrifying army of laser-wielding robot giraffes is functional or not. They're notoriously finicky.

Q: I see. Why giraffes?

A: Quite obviously because robot monkeys were already taken. But this is not about me. It's about mad scientists in general.

Q: Quite right. Now, tell us what your problem is with movies that have mad scientists in them.

A: I think it's simple, don't you? Have you *ever* seen a positive portrayal of a mad scientist in a movie? You have not. Because they don't exist. It's always mad scientist creates horrible monster, mad scientist raises the undead, mad scientist unleashes plague upon mankind, everyone *die*, blah blah blah. It's awful.

Q: Give an example.

A: Well, here's an easy one: *Re-Animator*. Here's the story of a brilliant young medical researcher, Herbert West, who does what? Learns to thwart death. With *science*. And isn't that the goal of all medical science? Sure, he's fervent about his work, and arrogant, but if you learned how to reanimate dead tissue, wouldn't you be a little arrogant? But instead of portraying West as the Nobel Prize winning character he will certainly be, he's this creepy little bug-eyed dude skulking around in a basement. And that's just wrong.

Q: To be fair, the things he brings back to life turn out to be evil flesh-rending zombies.

A: I'm not saying the science was *perfect*. But that's no reason to paint him as mad right from the start. That's Hollywood for you. And even if the scientist is not mad from the start, they often *become* mad during the course of the film.

Q: Like?

A: Like in *The Fly*. Seth Brundle starts off smart and eccentric, but by the end he's crashing through walls, kidnapping people and vomiting acid. That's just not fair.

Q: Well, he was turning into a fly at the time he did all that.

A: Don't try to excuse the filmmakers' sin. Have *you* ever turned into a fly? *I* have. I hardly vomited acid on anyone. So I know that film has got it com-

pletely wrong. *Hollow Man* is another example. Scientist starts off as nothing more than arrogant and eventually turns into a murdering psychotic molester. Just because he becomes invisible? As if.

Q: Perhaps they were trying to make a larger statement. You know, like invisibility is a metaphor for lack of responsibility, and that lack corrupts judgment.

A: Oh, please. Have you seen *Hollow Man*? Suggesting it has metaphor is a little much, don't you think. And again, it just doesn't track with reality. I know scientists who have worked with invisibility. They haven't gone nuts.

Q: So you know real invisible men?

A: Of course. There's one in this room right now.

Q: That explains it, that mysterious poking.

A: Dieter! Stop that!

(Disembodied Voice): Sorry.

A: My apologies.

Q: It's all right. What about when mad scientists are played for laughs? Isn't that a positive portrayal of a sort?

A: I don't know what you mean.

Q: Well, like in *Young Frankenstein*. Gene Wilder's Dr. Frederick Frankenstein is a hoot.

A: He most certainly is not. That role is an affront to scientists everywhere. It's the Jar Jar Binks of mad scientist roles. There's so much wrong with it, it's hard to talk about it without getting worked up.

Q: I apologize.

A: It's all right. I'll just take it out on the Gijrokaster villagers later. After I fix the giraffes.

Q: Well, but see, isn't that just the problem? I know you mad scientists are upset that you're portrayed in movies as erratic, evil characters using unethical tactics to achieve your goals, but in fact isn't that what you are?

A: I'm not following you.

Q: Take you, sir. Using your laser wielding robot giraffe army to subjugate a province of Albania. Doesn't that seem, well, a little extreme? And what separates you morally from, say, the character of Syndrome in *The Incredibles* who uses science to get back at and even kill the people he felt snubbed him as a boy? Isn't the portrayal of mad scientists in movies, in fact, totally accurate?

A: You wouldn't be saying that if I had a laser wielding robot giraffe here now.

Q: Possibly not. But I'm saying that now.

(Disembodied Voice): Actually, I brought a laser wielding robot giraffe with me. It's in the room. Just, you know, invisible.

A: Excellent! Fire, Dieter! Fire!

(Disembodied Voice): All right.

A: Aaaaaaaiiiieeeeee!

Q: Wow. Of all the people I expected your invisible laser-wielding robot giraffe to vaporize, Dr. Hermann von Gliebstein was not one of them.

(Disembodied Voice): We'll see. My parents live in Gijrokaster.

Q: Thank you for saving my life.
(Disembodied Voice): You're welcome
Q: Now please stop poking me.
(Disembodied Voice): Sorry.

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What Can Our Next President Learn From His SciFi Counterparts?

This week the American people chose Barack Obama to be their 44th president, which pleases some, annoys others, and reminds us all that the role of president looms large in our lives — making it excellent fodder for Hollywood in all sorts of film genres, especially sci-fi. And so I wondered what lessons these science fictional heads of state could teach our real future president. Should he emulate their courses of action? Let's go to the films.

Warning: This article contains spoilers. As if you haven't seen these films already.

President: Thomas J. Whitmore of *Independence Day* (Bill Pullman)
Crisis: Alien invasion!
Evaluation: Mixed, but mostly positive. On one hand, if I were president and a huge, alien spacecraft parked itself right over the White House, I'd head straight to an undisclosed location rather than wait while they decide to either beam down or blow it up. Then again, Whitmore did attempt to see if we and the aliens could live together, so he's open to diplomacy. But when push came to shove, he was into waging to nuke 'em, which I can't presidential. And leading the final air attack against the aliens? Very Teddy Roosevelt.
Lessons for the president-elect: Speak softly and carry a big enemy-busting stick.

President: Tom Beck of *Deep Impact* (Morgan Freeman)
Crisis: A comet is coming to destroy us all!
Evaluation: Very positive. First, he manages to charm an investigative reporter into keeping a blockbuster secret through sheer force of being Morgan Freeman. Second, when he announces to the country that a massive comet is coming and might kill them all, he keeps everyone calm by exuding that Morgan Freeman charm. Third, when it's clear that the comet will indeed kill them all, he gives a soothing valedictory speech that makes everyone feel okay about dying. "It's okay, because I'm doing it" in those deep, reassuring Morgan Freeman tones. And then, when only about half of everybody dies, he rescues everyone else. "We have to get back to work," and they get back to work — because he's Morgan Freeman.
Lessons for the President-elect: Be Morgan Freeman.

President: James Dale of *Mars Attacks!* (Jack Nicholson)
Crisis: Martians!
Evaluation: Very bad. He keeps falling for the Martians' "Oh, we want to be friends, please pay no attention to this vaporizing death ray we're using to vaporize you to death with" trick. Honestly, after the second time, you should really get the hint. Dale is ineffective in foreign relations; he gets assassinated.

in a really humiliating way, and he dresses badly (although that may just be the other role Jack Nicholson plays in the film. It gets confusing.
Lessons for the President-elect: Don't give your enemy a second (or third, or fourth) chance.

President: The President (no name given) of *Superman II* (E. G. Marshall)
Crisis: Coup d'Etat from General Zod!
Evaluation: Not only does he lose control of the government, he totally kneels before Zod, and thus is full of epic fail. Oh, sure, he says he's doing it to save lives, but look. Here in the U.S., we don't change rulers through a system of *kneeling*. We have *elections*. Besides, any treaty with General Zod would have had to be ratified by Congress. Really, there's so much procedurally wrong with this scene I hardly know where to begin.
Lessons for the President-elect: No kneeling before Zod! Seriously. Or anyone else, you're an American, and we stopped kneeling in 1776. Also, respect the Constitutional balance of powers.

President: The President (no name given, but noted in various places as "President White") of *Escape From New York*: Donald Pleasance
Crisis: Visits New York City!
Evaluation: Terrible. First, he's president of a country so messed up they have to chain off New York City as a prison, which suggests all sorts of infrastructure and land resource management incompetence. Second, his security is so lax that terrorists infiltrate and destroy Air Force One, supposedly the most secure plane in the world. Third, when captured by New York City prisoners, he babbers like a six-year-old girl, showing a real lack of character. Finally, he doesn't show real appreciation for everything Snake Plissken does to save his sorry tuchus, which is just plain rude.
Lessons for the President-elect: Pay attention to national infrastructure initiatives, don't skimp on security, and if you *do* turn a major city into a prison, don't ever, *ever*, fly over it.

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Do Science Fiction Movies Still Need Theaters?

The folks at Pixar sent me the DVD package for *WALL-E* last week, a three-disc set which includes the movie, an extra disc of goodies, and a version of the film compatible with portable viewers like the iPhone so presumably, you'll resist the temptation to find a pirate version online. In addition to giving my daughter something to brag about to her friends because we got the package early (it comes out Tuesday), the two separate versions of the movie—one for the home and one to take with us wherever we go—reminded me of how film viewing really has changed, particularly since the advent of portable media players. Go to an airport these days and watch people as they wait for their flights, and you'll see a good percentage of them staring down into a tiny screen, watching a movie or a TV show.

People love their movies; we've known for years (much to the economic joy of the studios) that they love to bring them home, and we know now that we love to take them with us when we go places. But this also makes me wonder if we still need the theaters that are films' first homes. What do the movie theaters still offer us that we can't get at home?

What Movie Theaters Offer: For the studios, of course, the answer is obvious. The theater represents their first revenue stream, the place where they can make back some of the outrageous cost of making and marketing a movie. People like to speculate about the death of the movie theater, but they've been speculating it since the birth of the television era, and very likely they will continue speculating about it for decades to come. Studios keep finding new ways to draw people into the theaters—or at the very least, new spins on old ways. The current rage for IMAX and other 3D versions of movies recalls CinemaScope and, yes, 3D films in the 1950s.

Given what the studios do to keep bringing us to the show, you would think that the main advantage that movie theaters have over home viewing is technological, but this is not entirely true. Chances are you don't have an IMAX theater in your house, and if you do, I'm offended you haven't invited me over yet, but on the other hand it's not at all unlikely that you might have a large screen HDTV capable television with a Blu-ray disc player and a 7.1 digital theater sound setup—or will have such a setup within a couple of years, as prices for all of these things drop. *WALL-E* or *2001* or *Star Wars* or *Iron Man* any other science fiction movie you might think of looks great up there on a theater wall, and sounds great too, but for all practical purposes you can create a nearly equally stunning cinematic experience at home, and many people have.

So what does the movie theater still offer viewers that you can't get at home? I'm going to suggest something that I think is counterintuitive. It offers a lack of control.

What It's Like to Watch at Home: Take *WALL-E* (again). My family sat down to watch it the other night, but we came nowhere near close to watching it uninterrupted all the way through. The phone rang and it was my wife's mother on the phone, we paused it so she wouldn't miss something. Then, at some point we all decided a bathroom break was in order. Another pause. Later, snack time. Pause. At various points we skipped back a bit because we missed something someone was saying or because we wanted to look at something in the background (for example, the Pizza Planet truck that's in every Pixar film).

Contrast this with how I saw *WALL-E* in the movie theater. Once the film started, it was out of my control. The story unfolded at the pace the filmmaker chose, and the story's emotional beats came in a rhythm uninterrupted by my personal attention preferences. Short of walking out of the film entirely, I had to take it on its own terms—surrender my will to the story, as it were. As a result, the emotional highs of the story were higher, the funny parts funnier, and the wrenching parts (yes, there are wrenching parts in *WALL-E*, that much more affecting. In the theater, you are able to approach the movie as a complete work and as a complete experience in itself. How we know *WALL-E* or any other film is a really good film is by how it makes us *feel*—which is to say, how much the film sweeps us along and makes us a participant in its story.

Being able to pause and rewind and such is all very cool—they're part of the reason people like to watch movies at home, and are especially fun with science fiction films, because thanks to special effects there's usually something cool to stare at in the background. Frankly, looking at the cool stuff in the background was just about the only way to enjoy the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy at all, and I know I had fun recently pausing the DVD out of *Iron Man* to get a gander at what was popping up on Tony Stark's heads-up display. But these features come at a cost. Each pause and skip degrades the actual viewing experience. Each pause and rewind draws you out of the story and makes you aware of the separation between you and what's going on in the movie, and that keeps you from getting everything you can (or everything the filmmakers hope you can—get out of it. You're never more aware that you're watching a movie than when you're watching it at home, because you have control over how it plays. The extra bits and the commentary tracks and everything else that comes with DVDs these days are all super cool, but they're not really "extras." They're compensation for what you lose.

And this is why science fiction movies, and all movies, still need to be seen in theaters. Because they're the places where the movie is still the most important thing, not just something else we do. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to have the *WALL-E* DVD package as well as the other DVDs in my collection. But I'm even more glad I got to experience it in the theater first.

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A John Scalzi SciFi Thanksgiving

Here in the United States it's Thanksgiving, when we all sit around with family and friends, eat a 48,000 calorie pile of food, and then collapse in front of the television to watch football. It's an American tradition, and I guess somewhere in there we maybe think about all the things we're thankful for. Since this is a column about science fiction and movies, I thought I'd make a list of the things I'm thankful for as far as those two things are concerned. It's pretty short. (Hey, if you're reading this on Thanksgiving, you're probably groggy from tryptophan anyway), but just because it's short doesn't mean it's not sincere. So, without further ado: Things I'm thankful for in the science fiction movie universe:

• I'm thankful for computerized special effects, which at this point are advanced enough to make even the cheesiest direct-to-DVD science fiction crud look passably respectable. Maybe some people miss the era of wires and clanky practical effects, but I'm not one of them.

• I'm thankful for Will Smith. He's made sure there's at least one watchable (not necessarily good, but watchable) big budget science fiction movie a year for, what, most of a dozen years already? Yes, I know, *Wild Wild West*. Hey, he was young. He needed the work.

• I'm thankful for Darth Vader. In the last 30 some years, has there been a better villain in all of film—not just science fiction film, but film in general? I tell you there is not. (Hannibal Lecter comes close, but dude, Vader could use his Force powers to feed him his own liver with a nice Chianti.) Vader is so badass that he survived George Lucas turning him into a whiny loser in the prequel trilogy. Think about that.

• I'm thankful for science fiction B movies from the '80s. Sure, there are better things in life than a home theater double feature of *Buckaroo Banzai* and *The Hidden*, but not all that many if you really want to think about it.

• I'm thankful that Charlton Heston decided to make *Planet of the Apes*, *The Omega Man* and *Soylent Green*, thus giving the previously A-list free genre of science fiction flicks a measure of respectability (and his own career a boost, I might add). I don't think Heston gets enough credit these days for what he did for science fiction.

• I'm thankful that Ridley Scott is the guy who currently has the rights to *The Forever War*, since that means the chances of the movie being worthy of the book have gone up exponentially.

• I'm thankful for *Wall-E*—the best silent movie (the first half of it, anyway) of the last 70 years or so, depending on whether you count *Modern Times* as a silent movie or not. Chaplin would have proud, either that, or sued Disney for stealing his character.

• I'm thankful the world hasn't turned into a *Road Warrior*-like post-apocalyptic mess yet. Although from time to time on the freeway one of those battle scenes seems like it would be fun, especially if it targeted the jerk going 45 miles an hour in the fast lane.

• I'm thankful I'm almost 40 years old and still want a lightsaber and a speeder bike.

• I'm thankful AMC lets me write about science fiction movies, which I love, and that you folks drop by to read what I have to say. Thanks, AMC, and thank you.

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SciFi Movies and Me

Just like every other person in the known world I have a Facebook account. Right now there's a "25 Things About Me" meme going around there, in which one dispenses personal trivia like Pez. I wasn't planning to do it, but then I remembered I had a column to write this week. So: 25 things about science fiction movies and me!

1. The first science fiction movie I saw was a Japanese monster flick on TV. It featured Gamera, and I remember being worried that a giant flying turtle would crush my house and everyone in it.

2. The first sci-fi I saw in the theaters was *Logan's Run*. I recall it not making a whole lot of sense, possibly because when one is six, 30 seems older than rocks.

3. The first science fiction flick that really blew me away was—wait for it—*Star Wars*. I had my first nerdgasm watching that Imperial cruiser scroll across the screen. I went home, made TIE fighters out of Tinkertoys, and spun around going "pew, pew, pew" for the next six years.

4. The first science fiction movie I was actively disappointed in was *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. I remember thinking, "I like special effects as much as the next kid, but shouldn't there be a *story* here?"

5. The first time I realized I knew more about science than science fiction movie makers was at age ten, when I went to go see *The Black Hole* and came out annoyed, saying, "Everything in the movie about black holes is just *wrong*!"

6. Also when ten, I saw *Alien* and thought to myself, "I am so going to have nightmares." And then I went home and slept like a baby.

7. When I was thirteen (a newly *manly* teenager), I hated *E.T.* for making me cry.

8. The most recent sci-fi movie to make me cry: *Wall-E* (see page 119: The Best (and Worst) Sci-fi Movies of the Year). Shut up. I am *too* manly.

9. The first sci-fi flick I remember seeing more than once in the theaters was *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, mostly to watch the "Genesis Effect" over and over.

10. In high school, a friend of mine proclaimed no one could possibly take science fiction seriously. I dragged him to *Aliens*, and when we came out of the theater he was born again. Or possibly he realized he just wasn't a serious person.

11. The most surprising science fiction movie I ever went to: *Robocop*. Me and a bunch of friends went in expecting a stupid flick and were shocked to discover it was, like, *good*.

12. I was physically injured watching *Jurassic Park*. I was working as a movie critic and sat next to a fellow critic who clutched my arm every time something scary happened, thoroughly bruising me.

13. During the *Jurassic Park* press junket I proposed marriage to Laura Dern. She turned me down. My wife is fine with that.

14. Although I recognize *The Empire Strikes Back* as the best *Star Wars* film by far, my favorite is still *Return of the Jedi*—mostly for the Death Star space fight scenes. I mentally block out the Ewoks.

15. My shameful (heterosexual) geek admission: Princess Leias bikini in *Jedi* did nothing for me. Sorry.

16. I was in denial about *The Phantom Menace* at first. Weren't we all?

17. *2001* is a brilliant film, and its sequel *2010* is not. But *2010* is more fun to watch a second time. "Brilliant" and "watchable" are not necessarily equivalent terms.

18. I think watchability is more of a virtue than many other observers. I'll never confuse *Independence Day* with timeless filmmaking, yet I get sucked into it every time it's on.

19. If I had my way, they never would have remade *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

20. If I could go back in time, I would not kill John Connor, but the *Matrix* sequels.

21. I'm still waiting for the sequel to *Buckaroo Banzai*. I'd make it myself, if they'd let me.

22. They won't let me.

23. They should. Because I would make it awesome.

24. *Buckaroo Banzai* rights holders: Call me

25. I once consulted for filmmakers who wanted to remake a sci-fi classic. They never did pay me, but then, they never made that movie. Even so, I learned my Hollywood lesson: Get paid up front.

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Two Basic Rules for Headache-Free SciFi in 3D

Over the weekend I took my daughter and a friend of hers to go see *Coraline* (more accurately, I wanted to go see it and used the two of them as a convenient excuse) and like many of the folks who saw it, we went to a 3D presentation. Watching the movie, I realized two things. First, *Coraline* is probably the best example of 3D I've seen so far, with the effect generally used subtly rather than, to, say, stick a spear right between my eyes. Second, even as good as *Coraline*'s 3D is, it still gave me a headache and reminded that 3D movies are not something I'm all that enthused about.

Why does this matter? Because movies—particularly science fiction and fantasy movies—are going increasingly 3D. Later this year the animated scifi spoof *Monsters vs. Aliens* will be screening across the U.S. in three-dimensional glory, and then at the end of the year James Cameron has promised to wow us with his mad 3D skillz when he debuts the hotly anticipated *Avatar*. And those are just the ones I'm looking forward to.

Movie companies like 3D because it's something that doesn't work well at home (yet), so it keeps people coming to theaters, and also because they can charge more for the experience. I'm not going to argue against either, especially in a recession, but if we are going to have a largely 3D future in the cinema, allow me to make the following suggestions.

First and most importantly, filmmakers should learn how not to make 3D hurt their audiences. I get headaches at 3D movies for two reasons. Misaligned glasses, which are my fault, and quick cuts in the movie, which are the filmmakers'. The problem with quick cuts in 3D flicks is that they require your eyes to do a quick hard refocus—and since the focal point in each scene is likely to be at a different depth, that means your eyes are working overtime.

The amount your eyes refocus in day to day life is relatively low, since most of us are usually looking at one thing for an extended period of time (for example, if you've been looking at pages in this book for at least a couple minutes now). A typical movie, however, has lots of cuts, and sometimes those cuts yerk around between closeups and far shots. In a traditional 2D movie this is no big deal, since you see it all on a single plane. In 3D, your corneas start to scream trying to keep up. Filmmakers need to stop using a two dimensional vocabulary on a three dimensional space.

Secondly, if filmmakers are serious going to pursue 3D then they need to make it more than a gimmick. It needs to be something without which the story would suffer. Let's go back 70 years to *The Wizard of Oz*, which used a process that was still something of a novelty back in 1939: Color. The movie didn't treat color as a gimmick. It was essential to the plot in that it demeaned the difference between hardscrabble, depression era Kansas (shot in black and white), and the fantastical Oz. You could have made the movie entirely in black and white, but it wouldn't have been nearly as effective. The process was essential to the story.

I'm not at all convinced there's been a flick in which the same is true for 3D. To go back to *Coraline*, the effect was excellent and interesting, but strip out the third dimension and the movie fundamentally works as well as it did before. So I have to ask, as a moviegoer prone to 3D headaches, why I need to see the movie that way and incidentally pay extra for my trouble.

Will there be a movie that needs 3D any time soon? On this score, I have to admit I have some high expectations for Cameron's *Avatar*. The director has a history of pushing film-making technology, simply because the technology he needs to do what he wants usually doesn't exist before he invents it. I have some faith based on experience that if Cameron says he needs 3D for his movie, he actually needs it. That's why I'll actually be willing to risk a potential headache for this one—something I'm not necessarily willing to do for all the other 3D offerings this year.

—February 12, 2009 Next 47, Previous 223

Future *Trek*-nology I Can Live Without

I watched and enjoyed the new *Star Trek* movie over the weekend (as did quite a lot of folks, which should make both Paramount and J.J. Abrams quite happy), but watching I was reminded that for every bit of future tech I can't wait to get my hands on, there's some tech I want no part of whatsoever. And what tech might that be? Well, I'll tell you.

Teleportation: In the *Star Trek* universe, this means having one's self disassembled and then reassembled some massive distance away via an energy beam. Leaving aside the philosophical aspects of this (is the reassembled you really you, or just a copy?), do you *really* trust a particle beam to disassemble and reassemble you? Are you aware of just *how many* particles you break down into? The layman's answer is lots squared. That's a lot of information to keep track of (physicists, don't come at me with "quantum entanglement" — that's not how *Star Trek* transporters work *and you know it*).

The idea that you're going to get reassembled in exactly the same configuration is pretty hopeful, and for something like this, 99.9 percent accuracy would mean you've been turned into a screaming lump of meat. Plus, per *The Fly*, you don't want the beam to get confused and fuse your DNA with something else, be it a flying insect or the *e. coli* living in your digestive tract. Really, I'll just take a shuttle, thanks. Speaking of which:

Flying Cars: The flying car sequence in *Attack of the Clones* alone should make the point. Flying cars are a *horribly bad idea*. Yes, it's nice to zoom through the skies and all. But, come on, people. We already know how badly people drive in two dimensions. Do you really want to add 50 percent more dimensionality to driving badly in? Work through the practical issues. Car accident? Pull over to the side of the road. Flying car accident? Tumble screaming for thousands of feet before going splat. Run out of gas in a car? Pull over to the side of the road. Run out of gas in a flying car? Tumble screaming for thousands of feet, etc. Don't even get me started on drunk drivers or people texting while driving. Crazy mad badness. It man was meant to fly, God would've given him plane tickets.

Thinking Robots: No, I'm not worried about the robot apocalypse a la *The Matrix*. I'm rather more worried about the *WALL-E* scenario, in which robots do all the work — happily — and people become pudgy balls of flesh lolling about all day without the slightest idea of what to do other than eat pureed food because it's just too much trouble to chew. *This is totally realistic.* Hell, I spend more than eight hours a day in front of a computer screen as it is, sucking down Coke Zero and being glad there's only one flight of stairs between me and my fridge. If I had C-3PO to get me my Cokes, I might have already fused into my desk chair by now.

This is the dirty untold secret of *The Matrix*. Not that we'll be enslaved by machines who hook us up to a virtual reality to keep us pacified—but that we'll plug ourselves in voluntarily. If you don't think this will ever happen, you've obviously never played *World of Warcraft* (or known someone who has). The minute we can turn our body maintenance over to thinking robots while we frolic, sexy and beweaponed, in a fantasy world—we're going to lose about half the people on the planet to it.

Warp Drive: Sure, it'd be nice to get pretty much anywhere in the galaxy in about fifteen minutes. But think about what that really means. No matter where in the universe you went, there would be a Starbucks, McDonald's and Taco Bell, there waiting for you. Nothing against any of those fine American brands, but I'd like for there to be enough temporal and spatial distance between worlds that going from one to the next takes genuine effort—and that where you're going is manifestly different than where you're coming from. Honestly, I think the idea of the Spider Gorillas of Proxima Centauri ordering a seven-layer burrito on their homeworld of Dor'GHI'A-Hu is genuinely depressing.

—May 14, 2009 Next 185, Previous 57

Transformers and Tentpoles—Diving Once More Into the Mailbag

Hey, you know what? Today looks like a fine day to go through the mailbag and answer some reader questions. It's also a fine day for pie. But let's do this one thing at a time, right?

First question:

> It's entirely possible that *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* will bring in over $400 million at the box office. In the interest of keeping me from killing myself over this fact, please assure me that we're in no danger of it becoming the most successful science fiction film of all time.

Well, if we're talking about domestic box office, in order for the new *Transformers* flick to become the number one science fiction movie of all time it would have to gross $461 million, which would squeak it past *Star Wars* (this is assuming that you don't count *The Dark Knight* as science fiction). I don't think the Transformers are going to manage that, frankly. But even if they did, you could take solace in the fact that when adjusted for inflation, a whole bunch of other science fiction movies have done better than $461 million, including *Independence Day*, *Spider-Man*, *Jurassic Park*, four *Star Wars* movies and *E.T.*

Next question:

> Why do idiotic films like *Transformers* and *Wolverine* get put into thousands of theaters while really excellent science fiction movies like *Moon* don't show up anywhere?

The short answer is that *Transformers* and *Wolverine* are "tentpole" pictures, i.e. the sort of movies that studios spend millions on in the hope of making millions from, so naturally they're going to be screened far and wide as well as promoted in a screaming haze of advertising, while *Moon*, starring Sam Rockwell as a schmoe on a 3-year moonbase stint, is sort of the exact opposite. A small movie, made for roughly the cost of *Transformers* shoots craft service budget and without the help of a major studio, *Moon* was never destined to get onto 4,000 screens on opening day.

Now this avoids the implicit question, which is why studios choose to spend millions and millions on movies based on toys and comic books and not on movies that grownups might not be embarrassed to be seen coming out of in the first place. The answer to that is actually the solution, which is that if you want studios to make those sorts of movies, go out of your way to see them in the theater, rather than just waiting until they wash up on Starz or HBO. It's not

that humans are getting stupider. It's that people interested in entertainment that doesn't EXPLODE aren't going into theaters. So, you know. *Go*.

Next question:

> Does *Up* qualify as science fiction? You have to admit, using balloons to fly a house is a good use of science. And then there's the translating dog collars. Those are pretty science fictional.

I'm going to give you the dog collars, but let's note that the collars don't explain how the dogs also fly airplanes or cook multi-course meals or play poker, so it's a thin science fictional candy shell over a thick creamy center of fantasy. Also, while I applaud Pixar's use of the scientific principles of buoyancy as regards the balloons, I'm going to get nitpicky and say that the mere use of a scientific principle does not science fiction make. I mean, Dorothy's house in the *Wizard of Oz* was lifted up by that twister in perfect confirmation of physical principles. It doesn't mean her landing in Munchkin and was achieved through the offices of science fiction. I love *Up*, but I'm pretty comfortable calling it fantasy.

Final question:

> Why aren't more movies being made from today's science fiction novels?

I've discussed at length before why you shouldn't hold your breath waiting for your favorite science fiction novel to come to the screen (see page 47, Odds Are Your Favorite Sci-Fi Novel Is Not the Next *Iota*, *Recall*). That said, I'll note from my own experience and from the experience of several author friends of mine that there is at least some interest in today's science fiction authors by filmmakers. A number of them have recently announced their novels have been optioned, including Cory Doctorow's current Hugo nominee, *Little Brother* (which is on my list of books that should be made into movies—see page 91, Some Candidates for the Next *Children of Men*). An option doesn't mean a movie's going to get made, but it's an encouraging first sign. So if you're a fan of modern written science fiction, there are some small reasons to be hopeful.

—July 9, 2009 Next 61, Previous 21

G.I. Joe, Toy Stories and Hugos—Diving Back Into the SciFi Mailbag

Hey, folks! I'm back from Montreal where, as noted on this blog, I picked up a Hugo award for one of my books. I'm very happy. But I'm also still totally discombobulated, so you know what that means. It's mailbag time!

First question:

> I noticed that *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* didn't have any advance reviews. Isn't that usually a sign that a studio hates the movie and wants to dump it?

It often is, yes—movie studios sometimes know they've got a stinker that they simply want to push out the door and not think about ever again, and those are usually the ones that slide into theaters, do terrible business for a week, then get shuffled off to home video as soon as possible.

However, there is also another sort of movie that studios decide not screen for critics. The ones they expect to be profitable, but which they already know the critics are going to hate, so there's simply no upside to letting them get a whack at it before audiences see the movie. Horror is one genre where this happens quite a bit. The flicks always get bad reviews, but also almost always bring in piles of teens and young men as a first weekend audience. Why drive any of them away with a bad review?

G.I. Joe is not a horror flick (except possibly in an existential sense), but it is a mindless explody action movie based on a toy line directed by Stephen Sommers, who while competent in this genre, is definitely no critics darling. Paramount looked at what they had, knew what the critics were going to say, and said "Why bother?" Given the $55 million opening here in North America ($100 million worldwide), you can't say it was the wrong strategy. Mind you, a better strategy would have been to make a movie that they could actually show to reviewers with some sense of pride, but this is the business. It's not all *Citizen Kane*.

Next question:

> Both *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* are pretty terrible films. Are there any good films based on toys?

Off the top of my head I can't think of a single one. And in fact theaters are littered with the terrifying cinematic spawn of profitable toys and games. If you are of a certain age, you may remember the eye-gouging horrors that were *Masters of the Universe* (based on the Mattel He-Man toy line), *The Garbage Pail Kids Movie* and its slightly upscale but a failure nonetheless *Clue* (based on

the board game and released with several different endings so the movie you saw depended on the theater you went to. And of course there's the original animated *Transformers* movie, much beloved by Gen Xers who apparently fell down a lot of stairs as children. Let's not even speak of movies based on video games[2].

All these flicks may be different flavors of terrible, but that doesn't stop producers from wanting to make more, probably because *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers* are hits. Gore Verbinski, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, is slated to remake *Clue*, while Ridley Scott, *Alien*, *Blade Runner* of all people is attached to a big-screen version of *Monopoly*. Yes, *Monopoly*. And of course there's meant to be a third *Transformers* flick and a *G.I. Joe* sequel, so I like y'. Prepare yourselves.

And, hey, I guess I can answer this here:

Tell us a little bit about the Hugo Award you just won, please.

It's the Best Related Book Hugo, for my essay collection *Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded*. This is the award you get when you've written something that's related to science fiction but doesn't fit into the traditional fiction categories, such as a biography of a science fiction author, an art book by an artist in the field, or in my case, a collection of essays, most of which touch on matters relating to science fiction and such. As someone who comes from a journalism background and has several nonfiction books published (including a book on science fiction films), it's a very cool award to get.

This year I was also nominated for Best Novel; the award was given to Neil Gaiman for *The Graveyard Book*, which, as discussed last week (see page 125), Searching for a *Starship Troopers* in This Year's Hugo Nominees) is well on its way to a movie adaptation. I was also nominated for Best Dramatic Presentation, Long Form, in my role as editor of the audiobook anthology *Mur Atropos*. This was a very cool nod, since the category is dominated by movies. The competition this year was *The Dark Knight*, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, *Iron Man*, and the eventual winner, *Wall-E*. As I thought *Wall-E* was the best science fiction flick of 2008 (see page 159, The Best (and Worst) Sci-fi Movies of the Year), I can't really complain. It was fun to be nominated.

—August 13, 2009 Next 235, Previous 125

John Scalzi's Guide to the Most Epic FAILs in *Star Wars* Design

I'll come right out and say it: *Star Wars* has a badly designed universe, so poorly-designed, in fact, that one can say that a significant goal of all those *Star Wars* novels is to rationalize and mitigate the bad design choices of the movies. Need examples? Here's ten.

R2-D2: Sure, he's cute, but the flaws in his design are obvious the first time he approaches anything but the shallowest of stairs. Also: He has jets, a periscope, a taser and oil canisters to make enforcer droids fall about in slapsticky fashion—and no voice synthesizer. Imagine *that* design conversation: "Yes, we can afford slapstick oil and tasers, but we'll never get a 30-cent voice chip past accounting. That's just *madness*."

C-3PO: Can't fully extend his arms, has a bunch of exposed wiring in his abs, walks and runs as if he has the droid equivalent of arthritis. And you say, well, he was put together by an eight-year-old. Yes, but a trip to the nearest Radio Shack would fix that. Also: I'm still waiting to hear the rationale for making a protocol droid a shrieking coward. Aside from George Lucas rummaging through a box of offensive stereotypes (which he'd later return to while building Jar Jar Binks) and picking out the "mincing gay man" module.

Lightsabers: Yes, I know. I want one too. But I tell you what: I want one with a hand guard. Otherwise every lightsaber battle would consist of sabers clashing and then their owners sliding as quickly as possible down the shaft to chop off their opponent's fingers. You say: Lightsabers can slice through anything but another lightsaber, so what are you going to make a hand guard out of? I say: Dude, if you have the technology to make a lightsaber, you have the technology to make a light *hand guard*.

Blasters: A tactical nightmare. They're incredibly loud, especially for firing what are essentially light beams. The fire ordnance is so slow it can be dodged, and it comes out as a streak of light that reveals your position to your enemies. Let's not even go near the idea of light beams being slow enough to dodge, that's just something you have let go of, or risk insanity.

Landspeeders and other flying vehicles: Here's the thing. In the *Star Wars* universe, there are no seatbelts. And maybe if you're flying your hoity-toity vehicle on Coruscant, you have, like, a force field that keeps you flying out of your seat. But I'm sees X-34 speeder on Tatooine? The Yugo of speeders, man. One hard stop, and out you go.

Stormtrooper Uniforms: They stand out like a sore thumb in every environment but snow, the helmets restrict view ("I can't see a thing in this helmet" — Luke Skywalker) and the armor is penetrable by single shots from blasters. Add it all up and you have to wonder why stormtroopers don't just walk around naked, save for blinders and flip-flops.

Death Star: An unshielded exhaust port leading directly to the central reactor? Really? And when you rebuild it, your solution to this problem is four paths into the central core so large that you can literally fly a spaceship through them? Brilliant. Note to the Emperor: Someone on your Death Star design staff is in the pay of Rebel forces. Oh right, you can't get the memo because someone threw you down *a huge exposed shaft in your Death Star throne room*.

Bad design in *Star Wars* is not just limited to stuff. Evolution here seems wacky too. Three choice bits:

Sarlaac: A monstrous vertimmobile creature who lives in an exposed pit in the middle of a lifeless desert waiting for large animals to apparently feel suicidal and trek out to throw themselves in? Yeah, not so much. Not even Sarlaac can count on an intergalactic mob boss to feed it tidbits.

That Asteroid Worm Thing in *Empire Strikes Back*: So, large space worm lives in asteroid disguises itself as a cave and waits for unwary spaceships to fly by so it can eat them. Makes the Sarlaac look like a marvel of natural selection it does.

Midi Chlorians: Oh man, don't get me started. Except to say this: If in fact a high concentration of midi-chlorians is the difference between being a common schmoe and being a dude who can Force Choke his enemies, the black market in midi-chlorian injections must be *amazing*.

Star Trek fans, don't get smug. I'm going after you next.

—August 20, 2009 *Next 237, Previous 233*

John Scalzi's Guide to Epic FAILs—*Star Trek* Edition

So, before I bang on bad design choices in *Star Trek*, let's recap what happened last week when I discussed bad design choices in (see page 235, John Scalzi's Guide to the Most Epic FAILs in *Star Wars* Design)*Star Wars* (see page 235, John Scalzi's Guide to the Most Epic FAILs in *Star Wars* Design,

Me: *Star Wars* design is so bad that people have to come up with elaborate and contrived rationales to explain it.
***Star Wars* Fanboy:** YOU ARE SO VERY WRONG AND I WILL SHOW YOU WHY WITH THESE ELABORATE AND CONTRIVED RATIONALES.

It's a little much to hope for (or fear) the same result two weeks in a row, but nevertheless I promised everyone I'd point and laugh at *Star Trek* design, so here we go. I'll confine myself to things in the movies. There are eleven of those, so it's not like this will be a problem.

V'Ger: In *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, a Voyager space probe gets sucked into a black hole and survives (GAAAAH), and is discovered by denizens of a machine planet who think the logical thing to do is to take a bus-size machine with the processing power of a couple of *Speak and Spells* and upgrade it to a spaceship the size of small moon, wrap that in an energy field the size of a solar system, and then send it merrily on its way. This is like you assisting a brain-damaged raccoon trapped on a suburban traffic island by giving him Ecuador.

The Alien Probe of *Star Trek IV*: The programming of this probe is even more simple than that of V'Ger, and could be written in four lines in the BASIC programming language:

```
10. GOTO Earth
20. INPUT "I can has humpback whale?"A$
30. IF A$="no" THEN GOTO 40
40. DESTROY EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING
```

I'm pretty sure this is not optimal design.

The Borg: Featured in *First Contact*, these are the most fearsome aliens in the galaxy, and look like the Tin Man on Goth Night at the local leather bar. You don't know whether to fear the Borg or to ask them if they think that upcoming *AFI* album will be, like, awesome.

Phasers: Bad design, or awesome? Evidence for awesome: They can very precisely vaporize living creatures —and their clothes— whilst leaving everything else (floors, walls, objects people are sitting on) untouched. Evidence for bad: Inconsistent power output. In *Star Trek II*, a phaser vaporizes a mind-controlling eel of Ceti Alpha V (also the Starfleet officer it's inside of —and his clothes!), but then turns another such eel into a smoky smear. Yes, one can dial down phaser power, but I'm pretty sure you can't actually set a phaser to "smudge."

Uniforms: You have your choice: Velouresque pajamas and miniskirts (resurrected for the 2009 reboot), burgundy jackets with puffy blouses (*Treks* II–VI), or progressively unflattering jumpsuits (*Treks* VII–X). Do Starfleet personnel ever stop what they're doing, look at each other, and ask "Who *dresses us?*" They should. But all of the above are at least better than the eye-poking fashions of the first movie. Speaking of which:

The Enterprise of *The Motion Picture*: It's a deathtrap. The science officer is killed beaming up because the transporter is screwy; the warp engines throw the ship into a wormhole (GAAAAH); and the phasers route through the engines, because, well, who doesn't like a power bottleneck? Now, the Enterprise is newly redesigned and it still hasn't had a shakeout cruise. Fine. But someone really should have nipped the "let's route the phasers through the engines" design choice in the CAD stage. Also, I for one wouldn't let them beam me up if the words coming out of the transporter technician's mouth were "Guess we'll find out if these work now."

Holodecks: In fact brilliantly designed, except for the fact that it's a little too easy to override the safety protocols (and, you know, die), but none of the movies ever addresses what anyone who's ever thought seriously about holodecks knows. Given that it's hard enough to get some MMORPG players today to take care of their basic bodily needs with Cheetos and moist towelettes, what's keeping the entire population of the Federation from queuing up the "Roman orgy" recreation, stepping into a holodeck, and never ever coming out again? If you say "they have to eat," allow me to introduce you to the magic of the food replicator.

Red Matter: I'm sorry, I can't even *begin* to coherently explain everything that's wrong and bad with "red matter." Every time I try, I just end up sputtering and gibbering and making plans to beat J.J. Abrams, Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman to death with the works of Stephen Hawking and Richard Feynman. Suffice to say that when a **deus ex machina** looks exactly like Sasquatch's ball gag, you might as well put up a sign that says "abandon all logic, ye who enter here." Or, more compactly: GAAAAH.

—August 27, 2009 *Next 23, Previous 235*

Oscar Bait, Low-Budget SciFi and 3D Longevity—It's the Return of John Scalzi's Mailbag!

I think I caught some sort of bug (as in "flu," not as in "insect" or "small alien creature that will devour me from the inside leaving only a squishy husk"), and that bug is making it difficult for me to string together thoughts longer than a couple of paragraphs. You know what that means. To the mailbag!

First question:

> This year the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences announced it was doubling the number of nominees for the Best Picture Oscar. Does this mean a science fiction movie might actually have a chance this year?

It's funny: I think one of the reasons that the Academy is doubling up on nominees this year is because *The Dark Knight* didn't make the cut last year, which surprised a number of people, including me. And I do think we're going to see more of a range in this year's nominees. That said, so far this year the science fiction movies are not really grabbing me as Best Picture contenders, even with the expanded nominee slots.

Of the movies already released, the only two I think are within hailing distance are *District 9* and *Moon*, both of which come with problems. *District 9* is gory, and its story construction is all over the board. *Moon* simply hasn't been seen by enough people, and it's likely to be swamped by everything else. *Up* has a reasonable chance, although I think it's only gotten fully science fictional (and is a lock for Best Animated Feature anyway). Looking to the rest of the year, if *Avatar* A) does immense box office, and B) has a story that's halfway decent, it has a shot, not the least because director James Cameron has been there before.

Otherwise, I think the real beneficiary of this expansion will be *The Hangover*, on which I'm laying down a marker as even odds to get into the ballot. You heard it here first.

Next question:

> Science fiction movies are usually big and expensive these days, so I was wondering if you can think of some good, really cheap scifi flicks.

Well, this year *Moon* fits that bill. It was made for something on the order of $5 million (and has made just under that in the theaters, which suggests it might

be profitable when it goes to DVD. One of my all time favorite examples, however, is *28 Day Later*. It was made for $8 million, looks like it was made for $50 million, and brought in $80 million worldwide in theaters, which makes it staggeringly profitable.

If neither of these is cheap enough for you, my ace in the hole is 2003's *Primer*, a clever little time travel story which did well with critics (72% at Rotten Tomatoes), won an award at Sundance, and reportedly cost $7,000 to make. It made only $424,000 at the box office, but that's still a mind-blowing return on your investment. I also suspect it's not actually possible to do science fiction more cheaply and have it be considered any possible flavor of "good," but I'm willing to be convinced.

Final question of the day:

> 3D. It's been tried before and it's failed every time. How much longer will we have to endure it *this* time?

If you're of the opinion that 3D flicks are to be endured rather than enjoyed, then I've got some bad news for you. 3D is here to stay this time. Unlike previous go-rounds, neither theaters or movie studios are treating it as a fad: theaters are rehabbing screens to project 3D using modern processes, and studios are announcing entire slates in 3D, most notably Dreamworks Animation, which has announced that all its releases from 2009 on would be in 3D. And of course there's *Avatar*.

That said, I do think in the reasonably near future we'll see some significant 3D flops, and studios will remember the trick doesn't help when your movie is unwatchable in the first place. I also strongly suspect that 3D will stay in particular genres. It's a no brainer for computer animated movies, and it could add a little extra spice to adventure, action and (yes!) science fiction — all genres incidentally with huge production budgets that would benefit from the surcharge theaters typically add to 3D ticket prices. I don't really see it making many inroads into, say, historical dramas or most comedies because in those cases it doesn't really add anything, and those audiences generally wouldn't want it anyway.

So if you're a hater, stick to historical dramas and comedies.

—September 24, 2009 Next 25, Previous 323

Answering the Burning Question—Can SciFi Movies Be Cool?

An interesting question from the mailbag

> Hey, Scalzi. Was science fiction *ever* cool?

The answer: Well, no, not generally, but it depends on what you mean by "cool," which is a fairly fungible cultural term.

For example, there's "cool" as in "the studied indifference to cultural judgment regarding what you like," which means that you like what you like and you don't care if other people like it. Science fiction fails this definition utterly, because science fiction fans are monumentally uncool—not because they are geeks and nerds, or at least, not directly because of that, but because generally speaking they really, really *really* want you to love what they love, too, and that sort of insensible urge to share is the opposite of cool. Mind you, sci-fi fans understand other people don't love what they love, but rather than not caring, they feel a little sorry for those people. Which is a different dynamic altogether.

Related to the above is the definition of "cool" as the "avoidance of being seen as too enthused about," the sort of cool that doesn't get too excited about anything, at least in public. And again, science fiction epically fails at this. Go to Dragon*Con sometime and watch 40,000 people dressed up as their favorite sci-fi characters migrate from hotel to hotel, and you'll know what I mean.

None of the above, incidentally, is bad; one of the reasons that science fiction rakes in huge amounts of money at the box office and is an essential part of episodic television these days is all those geeks evangelizing for their favorite genre. Science fiction is popular rather than "cool," and I think both geeks and studio bean-counters are happy about that.

All that said, there's another definition of "cool" which is "being at the right place at the right time with the right stuff," and that sort of cool can happen even to sci-fi. I present to you two examples of this, one from 1968 and the other from 1999.

In 1968, science fiction hit cool with *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Three things worked in its favor. First, the movie was in fact formally and cinematically "cool"—Stanley Kubrick, never the warmest of directors, was even chillier than usual here, pushing back the humanity of his characters to such an extent that a computer was the most human of all, and it was a mass murderer. Second, Kubrick larded the movie with trippy special effects that were exquisitely timed to be a favorite freakout of the psychedelic generation. Third, the United States was on its way to the moon, and the explorations of space and attendant contemplation of the various mysteries of the universe were on everyone's mind. Add it up and *2001* was serious cinema, seriously weird, and seriously cool.

In 1999 cool struck again with *The Matrix*. Like *2001* it had a number of things going for it. To begin it effectively exploited the aesthetic styles of *Blade Runner* anime and Hong Kong cinema all of which had marinated long enough in the video store-fed consciousness of teens and 20-somethings to become an instantly recognizable cinematic grammar. Add to that the goth-industrial costuming and design which had yet to twee itself into acceptance—and the fact that its leather dusters-and-bullet-time freshness stood in contrast to the gargantuan letdown that was *The Phantom Menace* (released two months later, and you've got cool. Yes I know. Shame about the sequels. But those were later my friends.

And you ask "Well what about *Star Wars*? If ever there was a case of right place right time right stuff *Star Wars* was it. And on paper I would have to agree—but in the real world I'm thinking no not really. *2001* and *The Matrix* rode the wave of their coolness to success and cinematic notability but *Star Wars* was a tsunami a once-in-a-generation event that swamped everything it touched. *Star Wars* was simply too damn big to be cool, and in rapid order became too much of a commercial and cultural institution.

Also, you know. Luke Skywalker astro-dweeb. He's no Neo. Hell, he's not even HAL. Not even becoming a Jedi could cool that boy up. And you know that for sure.

—October 22, 2009 *Next 243, Previous 101*

Five Ways a SciFi Movie Could Win Best Picture

Hey! It's Halloween on Saturday! So naturally this is going to be a science fiction related Halloween column, right? Wrong! Yes Halloween love it, mmmm, candy, etc But you know, I just don't feel like writing one of those You want a scary science fiction movie? Fine *Alien* We're done Go and have a spooktacious Saturday.

What I *really* want to talk about this week are the Oscars, which I talked about briefly a couple of weeks ago (see page 239 Oscar Bait Low Budget SciFi and 3D Longevity It's the Return of John Scalzi's Mailbag when I said I think the chances are low for a scifi movie to make it on an Oscar ballot It's difficult to get one nominated in the best of years, and even with the Best Picture slate doubling this hasn't been the best of years for science fiction But thinking about getting scifi on the ballot made me think of the next step winning the Best Picture award What would it actually take for a science fiction flick to *win* it all?

Well, a lot I don't think it's any secret there's an Academy bias against scifi This is not an open hostility (which wouldn't make sense considering how well the genre performs for studios and how many people a typical effects-laden scifi flick employs but an assumption that science fiction like fantasies action movies and comedies are "light" entertainments as opposed to dramas, historical epics and other such serious work Any of the movies in the "light" categories have to work extra hard to even get on the Best Picture ballot, so taking home the big prize requires Herculean effort.

Fortunately there is one closely related model that gives an indication of what it might actually take for a science fictional Best Picture *The Lord of the Rings The Return of the King* which took home the award in 2003 Fantasy, like scifi is a genre that rarely climbed up into the Best Picture nomination slate So what can scifi learn from the *King*?

1. Be Huge: And by huge I don't just mean "epic" although having an epic scope couldn't hurt No I mean be a physically massive undertaking *The Lord of the Rings* movies employed thousands of professionals for years across a range of Oscar categories The Academy isn't just made up of big stars and directors it has sound people and cinematographers and set and costume designers and effects people and so on, who will see a big movie as a vote of confidence in the industry Is this something that will actually get a nomination? Possibly not but once it's on the ballot I think it could be part of the background thought processes of those folks when it comes to voting.

2. Be Unspeakably Financially Successful: Science fiction already knew this from *Star Wars* and *E.T.*, both of which got onto the Best Picture ballot in no small part because they were simply too financially successful to ignore *King*

reconfirmed it by being the number one box office draw of 2003 and being the number two most successful movie worldwide (unadjusted for inflation, after *Titanic*. The whole *LoTR* series banked just under $3 billion worldwide, which didn't hurt, either.

3. Do Everything Right: It wasn't a huge surprise *King* and the other *LoTR* movies looked great—they had spent enough money on them, after all. What was a surprise to many was that the movies were also very well written, very well-acted, and had an emotional resonance that caught lots of critics (and Academy voters) off guard. *King* fired on all cylinders, not just in the technical categories where such things are expected of effects laden flicks.

4. Have the Genre Prove Itself: *King* did its own heavy lifting in this category by having its two predecessors nominated for Best Picture as well. This isn't something you can plan for (quite obviously) and if you do plan for it as a producer, man are you egotistical, but what you can hope is that in the few years running up to your movie's release, there are some highly regarded and successful sci-fi movies nominated in non-technical Oscar categories. It reminds the Academy voters that they are allowed to nominate "outside the box."

5. Be in a Weak Best Picture Slate: No offense to the other 2003 Best Picture nominees, but none of them were actual competition to the *King* juggernaut, the closest was *Mystic River*, but no one expected it to pull off the upset. Essentially, the road was clear for *King* to rule. As with the above point, this is not one that the filmmakers have any control over—it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

—October 29, 2009 *Next 245, Previous 241*

Ten Directors Who Really Need to Make a SciFi Movie

Last week I was noting the uphill climb scifi will have in winning the "Best Picture" Academy Award (see page 243, Five Ways a SciFi Movie Could Win Best Picture), but it's worth also noting that while it's hard for scifi to nab that prize Oscar winning directors don't have any problems directing science fiction. Last year's Best Director, Danny Boyle, made *28 Days Later*, a science fictional look at zombies, while Ang Lee (who won the 2005 statue) tried his hand at *Hulk*. Peter Jackson has *Bad Taste* in his background, and Steven Soderbergh attempted a remake of *Solaris*. Other Oscar winners who directed scifi include James Cameron, Robert Zemeckis and of course Steven Spielberg.

That said, there are a number of interesting and influential directors who have yet to direct in the genre. Which naturally made me think of a column. Below you'll find my list of the ten directors I really think should make a scifi movie. In no particular order.

Martin Scorsese: He's the ultimate gritty urban portraitist, which makes him an unconventional choice, but also remember that Scorsese has some surprising works in his canon. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *the Age of Innocence* and *Kundun* all suggest he's not afraid to stretch out and surprise viewers and critics. I literally cannot imagine what a Scorsese scifi would be like, which is the best possible reason for him to try one.

Clint Eastwood: Eastwood came tantalizingly close to scifi with 2000's *Space Cowboys* (I disqualify it because the science of the movie is contemporary, not futuristic) so it's not a huge leap to having him in the genre. Eastwood would likely prize character struggle over technology and make a scifi flick grownups could love.

Quentin Tarantino: Doesn't it feel like Tarantino ought to already have a science fiction movie under his belt? It probably has to do with Robert Rodriguez's half of *Grindhouse* being scifi horror. But he doesn't, and I think that should be corrected. Real Soon Now. Tarantino's video store past, love of pulp violence and gabby character building would make his science fiction either rocking or unwatchable. I'd risk it.

Paul Greengrass: The director of two-thirds of the *Bourne* series has a masterful way with action and the handheld camera, and also a documentarian's eye for the human moment (see his Oscar nominated work on *United 93*). Give him a genuinely compelling military scifi script, and I think he'd have to work hard for it not to be great.

Jason Reitman: Science fiction is in Reitman's blood (dad Ivan directed *Evolution* and the sci-fi adjacent *Ghostbusters* movies), but Reitman's own talents of finding offbeat humor would make him an interesting choice for a low-key, light look at the future. I can't help but wonder what his version of *Idiocracy* might be like.

Spike Jonze: Here's another director who has come close to the territory with *Being John Malkovich* and *Where the Wild Things Are* without quite crossing over. I say have Charlie Kaufman (who won an Oscar for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) write him a science fiction script and then let him go to town. There's an excellent chance what comes out would be something most people don't get, but I'm not sure how that would be *my* problem.

Michael Mann: The cerebral action director with movies like *Public Enemies*, *Heat* and *Manhunter* to his name (and yes, all right, *Miami Vice*) could do an absolutely terrific version of the Sean Connery movie *Outland*, or perhaps another movie with the same themes.

Atom Egoyan: No offense to Steven Soderbergh, but if anyone was going to remake *Solaris*—and that's really a question we could argue about for years—it should have been Egoyan. The *Adoration* director's version would have quite possibly been even less financially successful, and also I suspect brilliant.

Sally Potter: Yes, I know. Who? Look, go watch *Orlando* and then you'd understand. Her science fiction movie would be arty, no doubt deeply opaque and possibly one of the best queer cinematic experiences of the year. Hey, it's *my* list. I get to pick who I want.

Bill Duke: And since it's my list, I'm going to bring on a director from left field. Duke is best known as an actor (you remember him as Mac from *Predator*), but he's also a smart, savvy director who directed one of my favorite movies of 1992, the fantastic crime drama *Deep Cover*. Since then most of his output has been small, urban dramas. I say someone get him a sci-fi script and let him crank up his action side again. I'm up for it.

—November 5, 2009 *Next 63, Previous 243*

Education Is Not the Answer for *Star Trek*'s Bad Science

Here's an interesting question, sent along in e-mail, which I've trimmed down to the bare bones:

> Do you think science in science fiction movies would be better if science education were better in the United States?

This is of particular relevance to me since the home video release of *Star Trek* was this last Tuesday, and while watching with my wife I alternated my enjoyment of seeing the franchise revived with the aggravation of the science of the movie being aggressively bad, even for *Star Trek*. I've noted before with the *Trek* franchise that at this point one has to just let that go, but then I see a red matter again and I want to hit something. Clearly, I have issues.

Let me be the first to say I'm a huge proponent of more and better science education in our schools. In the tech-oriented world of today, a firm grounding in science will make our kids economically competitive and also better able to understand the changes in the world around them. I think science education more than any other is subject to the whims of people who have social, religious or political goals, which can limit what and how much science kids learn. This is stupid and short-sighted. More bad things will happen because people don't understand science than will happen because they do. So yes. More science education, please.

That said, no, I don't really think the science in science fiction movies would be better if suddenly everyone's baseline of science education here in the U.S. went up a notch or two. Why?

First, people don't care much about accuracy in movies. This has little to do with education and everything to do with entertainment, and it's not just in science. *Gladiator* and *Braveheart* are two recent Best Picture Oscar-winning movies featuring historical events and characters that are wildly historically inaccurate. At the end of the day, people don't go to the movies to get a history or science lesson. To the extent people think of this stuff at all, they group it into the same category as stage magic. We're well aware you can't make a whole tiger disappear into a puff of smoke, but we enjoy being fooled all the same.

People's willingness to let stuff slide is even more pronounced when it comes to science fiction, because the word "fiction" is right there in the genre title. This doesn't mean that such screenwriters and directors can't put in the almost negligible extra effort to give their fiction a more reasonable scientific grounding; the myriad new science problems of the most recent *Star Trek* flick, for example, could have been easily fixed with a few minutes of re-writing, at no additional cost to the production, and have made the final picture *better*—but it doesn't kill them when they don't.

Indeed, the people making movies almost certainly know they're getting it wrong. The screenwriters of *Star Trek*, Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman, are not what you would call uneducated. The former went to the University of Texas at Austin, a fine public university, and the latter attended Wesleyan University, consistently ranked as one of the best private colleges in the country. Director J.J. Abrams went to Sarah Lawrence College, also one of the most prestigious private colleges out there. The chance that these three don't have a better-than-average grounding in basic science, both in high school and then in college, seems pretty slim. It didn't stopped them from flubbing it.

There is a final point here, which is that even movies with bad science can still inspire the science-minded. Aside from James Kirk, the main characters in *Star Trek* are a science officer, a linguist, a mathematical wiz kid, a doctor, an engineer and a starship pilot who's good at fencing. Which is to say they're all geeks. If you think real world geeks don't look at that, say, *I want to be there*, and then work to make it happen, you've not been paying attention to all the technical progress of the last few decades.

So ultimately, no, I don't think science education (or the lack thereof) is the problem. I'd like for the science grounding in movies to be better, as it's often not that hard to do. But you know what most of super educated and science-positive folks I know love about their *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* and *Matrix* and what have you, even when they know the "science" is complete nonsense? If they're willing to go with it, you can't fault everyone else.

—November 19, 2009 Next 249, Previous 63

Avatar, B-Movies and *The Road*— It's John Scalzi's Mailbag, Thanksgiving Edition!

Dude, why are you here? It's like Thanksgiving. You should be rupturing your intestines with various meats and mashed vegetables and pies and then collapsing onto the couch in a food coma. Heck, I'm feeling logy just thinking about it. And because I'm feeling logy rather than ambitious, that means: yes, it's time for another mailbag column!

First letter, from Tom:

> You said a couple of weeks ago (see page 243) Five Ways a SciFi Movie Could Win Best Picture, that you didn't think a science fiction film would get on the Best Picture ballot this year. I think you may have forgotten about *The Road*. Don't you think it has a chance?

Ooooh, good catch, Tom. In fact, I did forget about *The Road*, which is science fiction by way of the "post apocalyptic" route, although I'm sure lots of people who don't like/know science fiction would be willing to argue about whether it's really scifi or not. Folks, it totally is. Thus have I spoken.

As for its Oscar chances: Maybe. This is a movie where critical reception is going to mean a lot, and while the reviews so far have been generally favorable, they haven't been uniformly so. A number of significant critics have been lukewarm or negative. If Academy members have a hard time coming up with ten nominees for Best Picture, it's possible *The Road* might slip onto the ballot. But I think it's more likely it'll show up in other categories. Viggo Mortensen has a decent shot at Best Actor. I imagine Best Cinematography isn't out of the question, and it might pop up in some technical categories as well.

That said, I think it probably has the best chance of any scifi oriented movie this year, although I'd asterisk that by saying I haven't seen *Avatar* yet. Which brings us to the next question, from Gail:

> You listed four reasons why *Avatar* can't fail (see page 63, Four Reasons Why *Avatar* Is Too Big to Fail) but I think you're underestimating the level of negative science fiction fan reaction out there for the film. It was even in your comment thread, where people were calling the film "Dancing With Smurfs."

Fair point, Gail, but I'll let you in on a secret. Fans matter, but they matter in a limited way, the amount of economic sway they ultimately have is often negligible. I like to say that a rabid fan base for a movie is worth about $10 million at the box office. That being the opening weekend box office of *Serenity*. Fans can add a bump to a movie that's already trending toward success, or add

another shovel of dirt to a flick that's already doomed, but if the fans are trending opposite of the general moviegoing population, they're not going to be able to save a movie, or doom it.

Now, in the case of *Avatar*, there are definitely people who have decided they already hate it, but I don't see that as the monolithic response; lots of people can't wait to see it. That conflicted fan word-of-mouth is going up against a massive positive promotional budget, and it's going to take a lot more than sci-fi fans snarking about Smurfs to make a dent in the opening weekend box office.

One other small point to consider: Director James Cameron's movie prior to *Avatar* had absolutely *poisonous* pre-release press and gossip. Did it affect the numbers? Well, you tell me. The movie was *Titanic*. Point is, if *Avatar* works, no one is going to care what people said about it *before* they saw it.

Last question, from Barb:

> AMC has that section of their site where they show B movies. Can you think of an actual recent science fiction B movie in the theaters? I can't.

The closest I can think of is probably *Pandorum*, which cost a modest amount to make ($40 million), was released by a small distributor (Overture Films), and disappeared largely without a trace ($10 domestic box office). But generally speaking, yeah, B-movies are pretty much out of the theatrical landscape; direct-to-video releases are their current equivalent, along with movies that debut on pay-per-view cable, like *Mutant Chronicles* (domestic theatrical gross: $6,800).

Which is to say that cheesetastic, hastily-made sci-fi flicks still exist, you just watch them in the privacy of your own home. Which is a bit of a shame, really. I like the idea of B movies—the silly, vaguely crappy flick paired up with the movie you came to see—that are really better as a communal experience. But there's too much money to be made programming the latest releases to show every half hour at the multiplex. That's fine, but it's not as much fun.

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone.

—November 26, 2009 *Next 127, Previous 247*

Thoughts on the Future of 3D Movies… IN 3D!!

A plea from a friend of mine this week while we were talking about movies. She said, "please tell me that *Avatar*'s success doesn't mean that *every* movie will be in 3D now."

I feel her pain. As I've noted before, I'm not personally a huge fan of 3D (see page 227 "Two Basic Rules for Headache-Free Sci-Fi in 3D"), in part because filmmakers—save James Cameron—still haven't figured out that when you make a movie in 3D, you can't make it like a 2D movie and expect people to come away without a headache. This much was obvious to me when I was was subjected to the *Piranha 3D* trailer before *Avatar*, which gave me more of a headache in a minute than *Avatar* gave me in two and a half hours.

But there's no arguing with success, and even before *Avatar* raged at the box office Hollywood was gearing up for more 3D productions. It'll be well-nigh unstoppable now. With that in mind, a few thoughts about our 3D future.

The good news first. Not every movie—or even most—will be in 3D. Because, well, why would they? Let's look back to the list of movies that were nominated by the Producers Guild for its Best Picture award. Ask yourself: What would 3D have brought to *Precious*? *Up in the Air*? The answer: Not a thing, and indeed a 3D process would have actively distracted from them. Also ask yourself: Is the sort of audience for a movie like *Precious* clamoring for it to be in 3D? The answer: Really, no.

3D is a special effect, and it's one that costs extra money at every step of the process—in the filming, post-production and exhibition. Producers are unlikely to want to add costs to a movie that won't result in a commensurate boost to the box office. So while it's *possible* that there might be a *Northanger Abbey 3D* in our collective future, it's not *probable*. Indeed, the only British drawing room flick for which 3D might be demanded is the potentially upcoming *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and I think we can all agree that's a special case.

So, I expect 3D will remain primarily in the realm of animation—particularly computer animation—where it's already widespread, and in action flicks of whatever stripe: sci-fi, fantasy, comedy, contemporary, etc. In both categories these are the ones most likely to be blockbusters, so I think it's a definite that the percentage of big movies that go 3D is going to go up—and that producers of these sorts of flicks might be more willing to pay out for 3D regardless of what it really adds to the final product. Why? Because 3D adds a boost to the box office, and with blockbusters, winning your opening weekend matters.

How long will this sort of "box office boost" strategy work? Until it doesn't, and we have our first massive 3D flop on our hands, and producers realize the magic boost has gone away. This sort of thing happens not infrequently in Hollywood; you may recall, there was a period of time in which every computer animated flick seemed to go right to the top in terms of box office. Then came *Final Fantasy: The Spirit Within*, which settled that particular hash right out

There's no doubt that in the reasonably near future a major studio will make a very expensive movie in 3D and that movie will fall flat on its three dimensional face.

This failure won't necessarily be because of the 3D process (there are lots of reasons movies fail). But it will be a reminder that 3D is not a license to print money.

The economics and practicality of 3D aside, I do see one potential artistic benefit of the increased use of 3D, and that is the return of the "long cut." In *Avatar*, one of the things James Cameron does is keep his images on screen for long periods of time, cutting down the number of times the viewer's eye has to refocus, and thus cutting down on eye fatigue. Contrast this with the ethos of Michael Bay, in which cuts happens so fast you'll miss them if you blink. Bay can get away with that in 2D, but if he does it in 3D I pity the poor theater workers who have to mop up all the exploded heads after the show. Fast cuts are a cheap and easy way to amp up the action, but if you know what you're doing as a director, longer cuts work just fine, too.

Personally, I see this as a big possible plus of the 3D era, so in that respect: Yes! More 3D, please.

—January 21, 2010 *Next 253, Previous 191*

Die, Human, Die! Pondering Death at the Hands of SciFi's Meanest Creatures

For the last few weeks I've been chatting about serious real world aspects of science fiction filmmaking, like movie grosses and award nominations and what it all means and so on. But this week I'd like to get back to the basics. To the essentials. To what really *matters* in scifi cinema.

And thus: A list of the pros and cons of totally getting killed by various scifi creatures. In chronological order:

1. Stormtroopers (The *Star Wars* series, 1977-2005)
Approved methods of killing: Shooting you with laser guns, setting fire to your moisture farm with you inside (which suggests your attempts at moisture farming are not so successful).
Pros: Stormtroopers are rumored to kill lots of folks on a daily basis, so at least you're dying in an efficient and government-approved way.
Cons: Aside from, you know, being dead (we'll take that as a given going forward), really? Shot by a Stormtrooper? The dudes make one shot in ten thousand, and the one that hits, hits you? That's gotta suck.

2. Deceptively Friendly Aliens (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977)
Approved methods of killing: Luring you to a remote location and then coaxing you into entering their spaceships where they will do *horrible things to you*. Oh, don't look so shocked. You always *knew* that was going on.
Pros: At least you got away from that annoying synth theme.
Cons: The stuttering cute aliens indulge in before they do the deed.

3. The Alien (The *Alien* series, 1979-2007)
Approved methods of killing: Bursting from your chest, drilling into your skull with auxiliary teeth, spraying you with acid blood, violating you impressively with a sharp and pointy tail.
Pros to dying this way: It's a perfect killing machine, like a shark or Simon Cowell, so at least you know you're being killed by the best. Also, nothing says "party" like a chest burster.
Cons to dying this way: You might wake up cocooned and when your friends find you they'll set a flamethrower on you. Which is painful and also *real friends don't burn each other*. Also, Wey and Yutani is likely too cheap for a nice funeral.

4. Klingons (The *Star Trek* series, 1979-2009)
Approved methods of killing: Photon torpedoes, phasers and disruptors. Bat'leths, headbutts with crenulated foreheads.
Pros: It is a good day to die!

Cons: Your frantic explanations that if they just wait until the Next Generation timeline kicks in we'll all be friends fall on deaf ears

5. The Thing (*The Thing*, 1982)
Approved methods of killing: Waiting until the two of you are alone, then whipping tentacles into your eyes and orifices, and becoming you, biting off your arms, inside a suddenly toothy abdomen
Pros: As you are stationed in Antarctica, you no longer have to be cold, smelly and eating nothing but canned peas during the six month night
Cons: Talk about identity theft. You just know the thing is going to run up your credit cards and, like, buy Snuggies or something

6. Replicants (*Blade Runner*, 1982)
Approved methods of killing: Shooting you, crushing your brain via your eye sockets, suffocating you with their hot gymnast thighs
Pros: As you die you may be able to appreciate the irony of dying prior to a creature genetically designed to expire quickly
Cons: Either just before or as you die, they may wish to engage you in a series of philosophical conundrums, which is odd timing and anyway, as if you weren't *busy*.

7. Sil (*Species*, 1995)
Approved methods of killing: Murdering you after she's mated with you, unless you're genetically unfit and push-in which case she'll give you a french kiss that takes out your brain stem.
Pros: You know all those times you said that you wanted to die while having sex with a really hot woman? Well, guess what?
Cons: As she's killing you, you'll likely wish to revise that previous statement

8. The Bugs (*Starship Troopers*, 1997)
Approved methods of killing: Biting, slicing, dicing, rather improbably launching flaming projectiles at spaceships in orbit out of the tail end of their digestive systems.
Pros: These babies can kill 100,000 humans an hour, so you'll likely die with friends
Cons: As you die you'll wonder if this isn't some sort of karmic retribution for that time as a kid with an anthill and a magnifying lens (answer: Oh, you betcha).

9. Martian Tripods (*War of the Worlds*, 2005)
Approved methods of killing: Zapping you into dust, setting your escape train on fire
Pros: Well, if you wanted to be cremated, you got your wish
Cons: The knowledge that that if you had just managed to hold on another couple of hours, that Kleenex covered with the swine flu you've just recovered from would've taken them out.

10. The Na'vi (*Avatar*, 2009)

Approved methods of killing: Poison tipped arrows with shafts as thick as broomsticks, having their pet flying dragons bite the hell out of you, leading you up the Hallelujah Mountains and pushing you off

Pros: A sort of natural and organic death with none of those troubling industrial overtones.

Cons: In the afterlife, the Navi goddess Eywa will point and laugh at you for being such a skxawng.

—January 28, 2010 Next 143, Previous 251

Everything I Need to Know About Winter I Learned From SciFi Movies

Like many of the people in the U.S., I currently find myself encased in what I believe the technical term is a metric buttload of snow, the sort where I could go out my front door and no one would find me until April. But unlike many, I am not filled with despair at the snowpocalypse! Because I have watched many scifi movies and they have given me all sorts of good advice about how to brave wintry conditions. And now, I will share them with you. Because I am giving that way.

***The Thing From Another World* (1951) / *The Thing* (1982)**

1. You know what, if you find an ancient space ship trapped in the ice, you might just want to *leave* it there.

2. If you're trapped in an antarctic research station where things have gotten weird, and one of your colleagues keeps telling you he wants to see you privately just for a minute, you don't *have* to set him on fire. Maybe he does just want to have a chat. But take a flamethrower with you, just in case.

3. Those people in the helicopter shooting at that dog? Maybe they know more than you.

4. The guy who accuses you of being the thing? He's totally the thing.

***The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)**

1. If it's so cold that your tauntaun wants to stay in reconsidering going out.

2. When you're caught in a snow storm and you hallucinate a dead guy telling you to travel somewhere warm and swampy, that's just your brain's way of saying "screw you for freezing me to death."

3. If you decide to cut open your tauntaun to keep someone from turning into a meatsicle, it's probably best to keep that from the tauntaun until the last minute.

4. That wampa doesn't want to *hug* you.

5. It's nice if your friend decides to ride out into a further and dangerous snow storm to come rescue you, but you probably shouldn't count on it. Emergency supplies can be your friends, too.

6. Have you practiced using the force to dislodge your lightsaber from a snow pile when you're hanging upside down? And why not?

***Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991) / *Star Trek* (2009)**

1. When the computerized voice in your escape pod tells you to stay near the pod, it might be right.

2. Creatures galloping toward you in the snow love it when you stand there trying to figure out what they are. It makes you easier to catch.

3. Related to this, you can't hope for an evolutionarily unlikely larger creature to spring out of the ice to eat the creature about to eat you. So prepare accordingly!

4. If you must take refuge in an ice cave, aim for the one with the conveniently placed Vulcan. It may take some guesswork, but it will be worth it.

5. From time to time, you may find yourself sentenced to an icy prison planet. When that happens, it's okay to ask for weather appropriate clothing instead of just going in whatever you happen to have on. Sure, someone in prison might take it from you when you get there, because that's what people on icy prison planets do. But *until* then, you'll be toasty.

***The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)**

1. Remember that when the temperature drops to 100 below zero, burning books to stay warm doesn't make you, like, a bad person. Well, no, actually it *does*. Sorry. You coulda burned the rugs first, you damn minimalist.

2. Also, geeks: When the Super Winter comes, and everyone else is burning books to stay warm? All that gloating you did about how awesome your Kindle is will finally come back to haunt you.

3. When half of the continental United States is encased in ice, saying "How's the global warming working out for you?" in an arch and sarcastic way will get you thrown out into the cold. Because while technically you may be right, ***now is not the time.***

***Alien vs. Predator* (2004)**

1. Hey, remember that advice about ancient space ships trapped in Antarctic ice? Goes double for pyramids.

2. In fact, when in doubt, just stay the hell out of Antarctica. Leave it to the penguins and the things.

See how practical and useful all this advice is for our current weather situation? Thank you, science fiction! Now we're ready for *anything*.

—February 11, 2010 Next 65, Previous 143

Would You Want to Live in *The Matrix*? What About a Galaxy Far Far Away?

Last week's column about how Hollywood doesn't really try to get the future right (see page 325 Why Hollywood Always *Always* Gets the Future Wrong) prompted the following question in e-mail

> Okay, so none of the science fictional worlds we see in movies are likely to come to pass. Would you still like to live in some of them anyway? I wouldn't mind having my own land speeder like they do in *Star Wars*!.

Well truth to tell, I'd like a land speeder too, who wouldn't? But I'm not entirely sure I would necessarily want to live in the *Star Wars* universe Sure the gadgets are cool, but the sociopolitical situation is a little dicey, you know? The Rebellion isn't out there just for the fun of it Indeed in a great many science fiction films and franchises we oooh and aaah over are places that are nice to visit but not necessarily great places to live To make this point, let me lay out the pros and cons of living in four science fiction film universes

Star Wars

Pros: Droids to cater to your every whim your own speeder bike and or land speeder fulfilling your need for a flying car If you learn how to manipulate The Force you'll never have to leave the couch to get a beer ever again dude, your very own *light saber.*

Cons: You're living in a despotic totalitarian empire there's a civil war going on and even if you're not actively involved there's still a chance your planet will get blown up by the Death Star just for kicks, the parts of the galaxy not run by the Empire are run by slug like overlords possibly of being choked from a long distance by a tall masked creep in fetish gear

Overall grade for livability: C Too much despair and tyranny crushing

Star Trek

Pros: The United Federation of Planets is by all indications a functioning representative democracy everyone's happy and provided a minimum (but nice) standard of living, sexy green skinned aliens unaccountably attracted to you Vulcans are plentiful and will be your wingman and do your mathematics homework with only an occasional raised eyebrow for an objection

Cons: Every few years the Earth is threatened by aliens who want to find their creators or talk to humpback whales or drop a black hole into the San Francisco bay and that gets tiresome after a while The Federation's actually kinda boring (unless you're on its frontier, in which case it is *all too exciting* wearing a red shirt increases your chances of death or injury far more than is naturally statistically explainable.

Overall grade: B-: Think of the Federation as the gated community of the future, and think of what the need for a gated community implies.

The Matrix

Pros: If you're in the Matrix, technically speaking, you don't have to do anything; you just lie there and let the machines do everything for you. If you're outside the Matrix, you can learn kung fu in fifteen seconds. If you're outside the Matrix and then go into it, you can pretty much kill anyone you want without feeling guilty about it, which is perfect if you're antisocial and/or psychotic and/or just having a really bad day, really husky raves down there in Zion.

Cons: Agents will kill you. In the real world you wear rags and eat goop and will likely eventually be skewered to death by a flying squid machine; the fate of your entire world depends on the dumber half of "Bill & Ted"; the fact that your life was in fact a machine-generated illusion means that all those years of P.E. class really *were* a complete waste of time.

Overall grade: D: Inside the Matrix, you're a slave. Outside the Matrix, you dress like a homeless person.

Serenity

Pros: Everyone speaks in really clever dialogue, so you'll never have a boring conversation. Combination American/Chinese hegemony means finally you'd pick up that second language, you can enjoy garb like chaps and leather dusters without people thinking you've got some sort of weird kink going on, lots of smuggling, which is the closest thing the future has to being a pirate. Yarrr.

Cons: Central government is a thinly veiled despotic bureaucracy with delusions of social engineering, perfectly happy to kill people it finds annoying (including you), when you least expect it, you are likely to be killed and eaten by berzerker zombies from space; after a while you'll realize all that clever conversation just makes you want to strangle someone; the nagging feeling that your universe isn't as popular as you think it should be.

Overall grade: C: Really only suitable for a select few.

So for the moment I think I'll just keep living in this world. Sure, that means no light sabers or Vulcan wingmen or learning Kung Fu in fifteen seconds. But it also means no crushed windpipes, despotic emperors or computer overlords using me as a flashlight. It's a fair trade.

—March 24, 2010 *Next 261, Previous 325*

Is Fake 3D the Cheap Colorization of the 21st Century?

In a moment which I believe almost certainly portends the Apocalypse, I find myself in complete agreement with Michael Bay about something. What is it? That it's really easy to make 3D really badly.

Michael Bay's comments on the matter come as part of his studio's push to make the next Transformers film a 3D affair using the "3D conversion" method, in which a film shot in a traditional, two-dimensional manner is then fiddled with inside computers to give it a 3D look and feel. It's the process most recently used for Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, and audiences will see it again in the upcoming *Clash of the Titans* (which was hastily processed into 3D after the runaway success of *Avatar* (which was shot natively in 3D). Here's what Michael Bay had to say on turning 2D movies into 3D:

> I shoot compressed stuff. I put real elements into action scenes and honestly, I am not sold right now on the conversion process. Right now it looks like fake 3D with layers that are very apparent. You go to the screening room, you are hoping to be thrilled, and you're thinking, huh, this kind of sucks. People can say whatever they want about my movies, but they are technically precise, and if this isn't going to be excellent, I don't want to do it.

Again, I never once imagined a situation in which I would say something like this, but there you go, Michael Bay. Because Michael Bay is right.

If you're going to do 3D, you need to do it well, and you need to do it from the start. Natively filmed in 3D, so that your production is designed to have it as a part of the process, not tacked on as an afterthought for a quick hit of cash. This is a point driven home to me a couple of weeks ago when I saw *Alice in Wonderland* in 3D at the local movie theater. The layering aspect of the 3D process in that film was pretty obvious; it's as if backgrounds looked like the back-projected images you'd see in '50s and '60s movies, and the planes of imagery reminded me less of the real world and more of the "multi-plane" camera animation technique Disney pioneered in *Fantasia* 70 years ago. In one sense, *Alice in Wonderland* was a perfect film in which to get away with this, because the setting is meant to be surreal; the paper-thin planes of depth could arguably add to the sense of unreality. But in another sense, I'm going to bet no one at Disney said, "Hey! These paper-thin planes of depth would add to the surreal nature of the film! Let's do it!" Which is to say from an artistic sense, **Disney dodged a bullet.**

Other films won't be as lucky, and movie studios who are very quickly becoming addicted to the extra $3 a ticket that the 3D process allows them to charge are going to find that out sooner than later. Audiences like to be wowed, but they don't like to be played for chumps. Squeezing an extra dimension

in post production isn't going to save a dodgy film, especially if the end result is that the 3D process makes it look worse, not better. Very quickly this fake 3D won't be all that attractive for filmgoers who know anything about the 3D process, and whether films were designed for 3D.

I'm likely to see *Clash of the Titans* because I have a professional obligation (heh heh heh) and also because my wife, unaccountably a fan of the goofy 1980s original, gets a big grin on her face anytime she hears the phrase "Release the Kraken." Nevertheless, neither she nor I are particularly interested in seeing it in 3D; it doesn't really add any value for us as moviegoers, and indeed if I see it in 3D, at least part of my time is likely going to spent being annoyed that the process isn't as good as it was in *Avatar*. Which means that the 3D process is going to pull me out of the movie, which really is the wrong sort of 3D effect. Better to see it in 2D and not have that problem at all.

One more quote from Michael Bay: "Studios might be willing to sacrifice the look and use the gimmick to make $3 more a ticket, but I'm not." Good on him, and I hope more directors will say the same thing. If you're going to sell me a 3D film, make it 3D from the ground up. Plan it for 3D, design it for 3D and shoot it in 3D. Otherwise it's just the 21st century version of colorizing black and white films. Obviously fake, and certainly not better.

—March 31, 2010 *Next 327, Previous 259*

Is the World Ready For a Michael Bay Romantic Comedy?

Here's a fun question from the e-mail pile that picks up where last week's column left off:

> You wrote last week about directors who made famous science fiction films but weren't typecast as "science fiction directors." I was wondering if you think any of the directors who are typecast like that could do something else. For example, will we ever see a **romantic comedy from Michael Bay?**

Oh, wow, a terrifying thought, now that you've put it. Michael Bay's *First Date: The Reckoning*. He's a time-traveling vigilante; she's a renegade sexbot; and on their date they go to a restaurant where all the food EXPLODES! It'll make millions! **Especially if it stars Megan Fox.**

I'm being a bit unfair to Michael Bay because it's cheap and easy to do so. Bay isn't my favorite director (indeed, he's pretty much on the left side of my "Favorite directors" bell curve—and I don't think dealing with live humans is his directorial forte). But (and you must appreciate the effort I'm making here) he's not incompetent. If he got a really excellent script, surrounded himself with top-flight actors who weren't slumming, and maybe hooked up with a producer who would actually sell it him to get back in there and film actual performances, and an editor who could curb his addiction to fast cuts and flashy cinematic tricks, then, sure, he could probably do something else than a Michael Bay Movie. So it's entirely possible, if not probable, that Bay could attempt a romantic comedy or a serious drama or whatever.

But the question then is: why would he bother? It's worth remembering that Bay did try to stretch himself once, with *Pearl Harbor*, and he wasn't necessarily thanked for the effort. It's hard to classify a movie that brought in $200 million domestically and $450 million worldwide as a flop, but I don't think there's anyone who gets a new tee's that the film did for Bay what *Titanic*, *Schindler's List* or *Gladiator* did for their respective directors, who until that time were more or less defined—and confined—by their science fiction and action movie pedigrees.

So if I were Michael Bay, I suppose I would be wondering what the upside would be to try something else—and if I were a movie studio executive I would be wondering the same thing. Bay can bring in $800 million worldwide by choreographing humans running around CGI robots. I'm pretty certain he's not going to do the same sort of business with a small, quiet film examining the **depths of the human soul.**

Nor at this point should he attempt to do such a thing; would he get much credit for it anyway? Allow me to suggest that even if Bay did do a small, character-oriented film and pulled it off artistically, he and the film would still get whacked on by critics who would be prejudiced by their recollections of his

other films. Even the ones who were positive would still probably hedge their bets because, after all, who ever heard of an emotionally fulfilling Michael Bay film? A part of their critical brain would be saying to them "who are you going to believe? Me or your lying eyes?"

In short, I suspect that even if Bay *could* do other kinds of films, as a practical matter he's stuck doing what he does. He's certainly not the first director to stuck in a category—would you want to see the James Brooks version of *Armageddon*? Really? How about the Nancy Meyers version? —but in as much as his particular field of typecasting is making him stinking rich, I'm hard pressed to see why he should lose any sleep over it. He's like the cheesy rock band all the critics hate but who fill up stadiums night in and night out. Yes, Michael Bay is cinema's Motley Crue. He creates contentless feel-good spectacle with lots of explosions and a hell of a light show, and then he goes home to dream on a mattress filled with hundred dollar bills. And then the next day he gets up and does it again.

Michael Bay is a fun and obvious example here, but there are other science fiction–identified directors one could slot in here as well. Could the Wachowski Brothers make a romantic comedy? Could Roland Emmerich? Could George Lucas? And in each case, if you think they could, do you think it makes any sort of sense for them to do so? The answers for me here vary, but in each case I'll say this much: At the end of the day, I wouldn't begrudge any of them—even Michael Bay—a chance to try.

—April 21, 2010 Next 149, Previous 329

John Scalzi's Science Fiction Film Birthday Wishes—Cloverfield vs. Godzilla, and Antonio Banderas

It was my birthday last Monday. Don't worry, I wasn't expecting you to have gotten me anything, because I didn't get anything for you on your birthday, either, and anyway I'm one of those people who is hard to get gifts for, since when I want something I just go out and buy it rather than passive-aggressively hinting to my wife about what I want. I find it's just easier that way. I end up getting a lot of socks.

Nevertheless, there are some things I'd one day like for my birthday which I can't buy and as it not entirely coincidentally happens, they involve science fiction films. And while it's too late for this year (I got socks!) maybe someone out there can start working on the things for next year.

1. I'd wish for George Lucas to come to my house and personally apologize for the *Star Wars* Prequel Trilogy. Because in his heart he knows he has sinned. *Horribly.*

2. But that's not all! On the porch of my house, I wish for Lucas to announce that he's expunging the Prequels from the Star Wars canon and has hired someone new to write and direct the story of Darth Vader's rise. Who? Why, Quentin Tarantino, of course. Because, come *on*, that would be awesome. QT's steeped in the ore he does pun by doing like no one else in the business, and anyone who's seen the House of the Blue Leaves scene in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* knows that QT would make lightsaber duels that will reduce the fanboys to limpid puddles of squee. Also, this time you could be sure Mace Windu would not go out like a punk. Search your heart. You know it to be true.

3. I wish for the third Riddick movie currently in pre-production to pretend that *the Chronicles of Riddick* was a low-dream drought about as some sort of intestinal parasite, i.e., it never really happened. This is called the *Highlander* Maneuver, although one hopes that Riddick 3 is better than the third movie in that series.

4. Although my 11-year-old daughter will disown me, I wish that James Cameron would say "Hey, you know what? No *Avatar* sequel." Because in a very real sense, a sequel to *Avatar* makes as much sense as a sequel to *Titanic*. Or to put it another way: whatever film James Cameron makes next, people are going to come to *anyway*, so why not do something new. Alternately, that it gives the reins to a second *Avatar* movie to a young, smart director who pushes into a new place, like Cameron himself did with the *Alien* series. It's not too much to ask.

5. Somewhat related: I wish someone would give Kathryn Bigelow $200 million dollars and tell her to go make the most kickass science fiction action movie ever. Because she totally would.

6. I wish someone would greenlight one of the following books for a movie: *Snow Crash*, by Neal Stephenson; *Hyperion* and its sequel by Dan Simmons; *Grass* by Sheri Tepper. To be clear, I would be happy if all of them were greenlit, but I'm not greedy. One of them would be just fine.

7. And while I'm on record noting that to date all movies based on video games have been, as comedian Oswalt Patton might say, failure piles in a sadness bowl, I wish that someone would realize that *Half Life* and *Half Life 2* could be the games that could break that particular depressing streak. And, yeah, a *Halo* movie in there might have a chance too.

8. In my deepest heart of entirely wrong wishes, I would love to see a *Cloverfield* vs. *Godzilla* movie. In 3D! Okay, maybe not 3D, because if they filmed it like they filmed *Cloverfield* and made it three dimensional, the theater floor would be a flume ride of vomit. And that's no good.

9. When the revived Star Trek franchise inevitably gets around to hauling up Khan, I wish they'd use Antonio Banderas in the role. Yes, I know. But Ricardo Montalban wasn't exactly correct ethnic casting for the role, either, was he? And just imagine Antonio Banderas saying "From Hell's heart, I stab at thee!" As Capt. Picard would say. And will say again, once The Next Generation is rebooted (oh, fifteen years from now). "Make it so."

10. And while I think we've really had enough remakes out there in Hollywood, I'd make an exception for just one. I really, really *really* wish they'd reboot *Buckaroo Banzai*. And that they'd let me re-write it.

Hey, these are my birthday wishes. I didn't say they were *realistic*. But I'd tell you what: They'd all beat another pair of socks.

—May 12, 2010 Next 331, Previous 193

Splice, Artificial Life, and the Summer Box Office So Far

This column is always about me, me, me. Let's take a couple of questions from readers.

First question:

> Scientist Craig Venter announced a couple of weeks ago that he and his fellow scientists had created an artificial life cell. Do you think news like that could have an impact on *Splice*, the movie in which scientists create artificial life?

You'd think it would, wouldn't you? Although, of course, the two scenarios are wildly different in the details. *Splice* has its scientists basically going the *Species* route of mixing their improved genetics with the human genome, with typically "We probably shouldn't have done that" results, while the real-life scientists have merely been about to coax a single-celled organism, whose genes had been partially human-designed into dividing and forming a small colony. And while it should be noted that my "merely" notation here is like saying Orville and Wilbur Wright merely flew a couple hundred feet on that first flight of theirs, you get what I'm saying, which is that the real-life version of this particular miracle is less cinematically dramatic.

Nevertheless, creating artificial life of any sort is a hell of a thing. I expect that when Venter and company announced their work, the producers and director of *Splice* were happily punching the air and thrilled that there was a significant real-world incident on the same theme as their film. It's free advertising of a sort: the public is made aware of a significant real-life event, and so they might be primed, subconsciously or otherwise, for a film on that same general theme. It also certainly gives the filmmakers and their actors a hook to discuss during the press interviews leading up to the release of the film.

That said, I wonder in this particular case how much the real-world news is going to matter for the film. While taking nothing away from the rather awesome (in the genuine sense of the word) achievement of the real-world scientists, news of their feat and commentary about it quickly took a backseat to a story of technology failing on a massive scale, i.e., the Gulf of Mexico oil spill story, which I suspect took up a lot of the bandwidth that might have otherwise gone to the artificial-life story.

So my expectation is that while the real world artificial life story certainly doesn't hurt *Splice*, it's not going to help it as much as it otherwise might have. It'll have to stand on its own cinematic qualities. Which, as it happens, dovetails a bit into the next question:

> With the exception of *Iron Man 2*, it seems like most of the big releases of the summer so far haven't done as well as Hollywood hoped they would. I can't help notice that *Iron Man 2* is the only science fiction related film of the bunch. Do you think Hollywood now regrets not having more science fiction in the summer schedule?

Well, it's only just after Memorial Day, so it's a little early to be writing any obits on that score. It's also probably a little early to call most of these other films disappointments. As I noted last week, it's possible that *Shrek* will follow in the path of fellow 3-D films *Avatar* and *How to Train Your Dragon*, with a (relatively) modest opening but with longer legs in the box office race. And while another big film, *Robin Hood*, has not exactly wowed the domestic box office, it's on pace to finish near $100 million, and its international box office is double its domestic take.

I know *Sex and the City 2* and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* had softer than expected openings, but that probably has something to do with the films being more or less universally thumped upon, rather than them not being science fiction. And finally, while we can claim *Iron Man 2* for science fiction—it's the suit!—I think we all also know it really belongs to the comic book genre of films first, and science fiction boosters have to bask in reflected glory with that one.

With all of that noted, I will say that the box office expectations for *Splice* are probably relatively modest. It's a sensibly budgeted genre film with affordable actors and an unknown director, so if it outperforms at the box office next weekend (which I'm going to say means bringing in $25 million or better), then there's a good chance the bean counters and studio heads will be wondering why they don't have more films like it on the summer schedule. (Although, in fact, they do have another sensibly budgeted genre flick with affordable actors and a no-name director on the schedule: *Predators*, which, like *Splice*, stars Adrien Brody.)

So, as always, we'll have to see what happens next. That's what makes the summer film season so much darn fun.

—June 2, 2010 *Next 269, Previous 195*

The Alien-Powered Bike From *E.T.* and Other Must-have SciFi-Movie Rides

In the last six weeks, I have been to ten cities, which means that I've spent quite a lot of time in airplanes, rental cars, shuttles and other forms of transportation. So naturally I've been thinking about what it takes to get around in the world. And just as naturally, spending time in planes, trains and automobiles has gotten me thinking about transportation in science-fiction films and which of the various ways of getting around in futuristic films seem the most interesting to me. And after some thought, here are some of the ways I would love to get around, if I could live in those science-fictional worlds.

1. Speeder Bike, *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi*: Hands down, the science-fictional conveyance I covet the most is the speeder bike from *Jedi*: so fast, so cool, and with lasers in front, which, to be blunt about it, would really come in handy on the freeway if someone wouldn't let me lane split. However, this personal desire for a speeder bike is tempered by the real world issue that I suspect I would be monumentally incompetent to drive the thing, because it's insanely fast and I doubt my reflexes could keep up and because there are no seat belts to keep me from turning into road pie when some idiot bumps into me. I mean, heck, I won't even drive a motorbike, because I'm sure I'd be dead in a week. On a speeder bike I'd probably hit a tree in a under an hour. But I don't care. I still want one. Badly.

2. Supercool Audi, *I, Robot*: Will Smith has an Audi that is sleek, fast, wheels optional and even driver optional. Since most of the film we see him letting the car drive itself, while he accesses data. This is the car for me, because, let's face it, why would I want to have to focus on the highway when I could focus on the information superhighway — or more accurately, just spend all my time writing Tweets or whatever? Yes, the supercool Audi eventually ends up wrecked, after it's attacked by evil robots and Will Smith takes over the driving of the car from the computer, but I'd gladly let the car keep driving itself and be welcome our new robot overlords if it meant no more traffic jams.

3. The Shuttle, *Star Trek* Series: There's no way in hell you would ever get me onto a *Star Trek* transporter pad, because you know what happens when something disassembles your particles by particle and shoots those particles through space to reassemble somewhere else. If you said, "Oh, you totally die," then you and I have the same fundamental concern. So it's the shuttles for me, and I'm happy to say that they are generally pretty capable machines: they can go anywhere, take anything and do all sorts of stuff. Like tow sport dune buggies and let people drop out of them for high altitude insertion missions. They're like the pickup trucks of space, and how can you not like that?

4. Alien-Powered Flying Bicycle, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial:* I admit that this one is the least practical of the transportation methods, not least because you'd have to persuade an alien to go flying with you every single time you wanted to go down to the store for some milk. Be that as it may, there's something endearingly kludgy about it, and also I suspect that the exhilaration of flying on an object meant for riding on the ground would overcome the worry that at any moment you'd totally fall off the thing and then not even E.T.'s freaky glowing finger would keep you from becoming a nasty splatter on a suburban cul-de-sac.

5. Iron Man Suit, *Iron Man:* I'm not big on this particular series of films, but you know what? Sign me up for an Iron Man suit any day. There is nothing not to like about a groovy metal uniform that makes you a human convertible and lets you shoot exploding plasma bolts (just for starters) from your palms. Plus, being able to hit Mach three without being surrounded by a plane has probably got to be one of the most boldly, soul-shudderingly spectacular life experiences one could ever have, and I for one am perfectly willing to have that experience.

Actually, in my perfect world I would ride a speeder bike while wearing the Iron Man suit, so that way, when I crashed the thing, I could walk out of the little crater I would have made of myself, dust myself off, and laugh. This is, I think, a worthy life goal for anyone.

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Hey, Who Put the Environment in My Science Fiction Flick?

Here's a question from the mailbag that is tuned into current events:

> Given what's happening in the Gulf of Mexico right now, what are the chances that we'll see movies in the future about environmental destruction or the collapse of civilization? Are there a bunch of dreary science fiction environmental lectures waiting for us?

I do think it's pretty likely that in the future we're going to see science-fiction movies on these themes, although I think the proximate cause will be less about the oil spill and more about a gusher of another sort. *Avatar*, which was (at least nominally) an environmentally conscious science-fiction film and which, as we all know, brought in a couple of billion and change at the worldwide box office. There were folks who derided it for its environmental messages, just as there were people who derided it for its story—depictions of the native inhabitants of Pandora etc.—but in the end it's money that provides the lessons for the movie studios, and, in this particular case, the lesson would be this: environmental themes don't necessarily hurt your box office.

Not only that, but environmental themes and the commensurate themes of environmental destruction aren't new in the science-fiction field, as films from *Silent Running* to *WALL-E* make amply clear. Science fiction films have a running conversation with contemporary culture about its anxieties, which is why the films brought us radioactively mutated monsters in the sixties and seventies, allegories about racial tensions and overpopulation, and why today biological themes, from zombies to genetic engineering, pepper the landscape.

Environmental concerns have been a constant theme in science fiction over the last few decades, even if it's not the top element on getter. The theme can certainly add spice: *Star Trek V* blew up a Klingon energy factory (and the moon) as it was only to create an environmental crisis that gets the ball rolling for the rest of the film, which was not really about environmental issues from then on. *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, neither of which are directly about environmental collapse, certainly wouldn't be as cinematically evocative as they are if they took place in a future in which the sun was allowed to peek out from behind the clouds now and again.

Now, while the environment is a favorite sci-fi film motif, either directly or as a flavoring to more direct themes, the question is whether the Gulf oil spill will in itself act directly as a motivator to filmmakers. My short answer: got me. I do think the oil gushing into the gulf right now does rub our noses in the fact that our favorite power source—oil—is getting harder to find, and that the risks in getting it are higher. It also points out that one of the consequences of our energy-dependent lifestyles is the potential despoliation

of nature. But these are not things we didn't know before Deepwater Horizon blew up, so unless science fiction filmmakers go out and create a movie that features an obviously analogous situation, it's going to be hard to directly credit its influence.

That's rarely how these things work, in any event. What the oil spill does is bring issues of energy acquisition and environmental fragility to the forefront of our cultures consciousness, where they become huge shares of our national and international conversation between ourselves. Those concerns, in a general sense, get into our art, not just films but also books, music, television, video games, and so on. Like I said before, science fiction films have a running conversation with common culture. If we're thinking about it, it's going to show up in our science fiction. We're definitely thinking about oil these days, and what it's doing to the Gulf of Mexico, its waters, its beaches, and its wildlife. Directly or (as is more likely) indirectly, we'll see that reflected in what we see onscreen.

The challenge for filmmakers will be to tap into those themes and anxieties without making them seem like part of a lecture. *Avatar* and *WALL•E* succeeded because, even though they made their points about the consequences of environmental despoliation, those points supported the adventure stories of their protagonists. In a film that's not a documentary (and even then, albeit in a different way), if you're not entertaining the audience, they're not going to pay attention to whatever environmental points you wanted to make anyway.

So to answer the question: yes, you're likely to see environmentally themed science fictions in the future. We would have, even without the spill. Will they be dreary? If they are, they won't be in the theaters for long. And that will be a lesson Hollywood learns quickly.

—June 23, 2010 *Next 335, Previous 333*

Random Thoughts on *Predators*, *Inception*, and Buzz Lightyear

I'm having random thoughts about movies this week. And now I'm going to share them with you. Because that's how this gig works. Says so right here on my contract.

1. Here's what I was thinking as I was watching *Toy Story 3*: you know what would be cool? A Buzz Lightyear movie. Not starring the toy Buzz Lightyear. I'm talking about the character the toy represents, the one the toy thinks he is in the first *Toy Story*. That guy. Yes, I know there was an animated TV show on the Disney Channel. I am a nerd; thank you very much. But you know what? That show stunk in no small part because it wasn't actually made by Pixar. Now imagine a real Buzz Lightyear movie, made by Pixar, on a big screen. It would be funny. It would be thrilling. It would probably be in 3-D (because that's just the way it is these days—and it would be awesome. Come on, Pixar, make daddy happy here.

2. I was pleasantly surprised by how much I liked *Predators*. It was the first *Predator* sequel that didn't plain suck right out of the gate. I'm including the *Alien vs. Predator* films in here, obviously—and the reason was that it was clear that the filmmakers, including producer Robert Rodriguez, actually understood what made the first film in the series work. Despite its classic status at this point, the first *Predator* flick was not a brilliant piece of filmmaking. Instead, it was extremely competent entertainment: it moved fast, it gave you action on a regular basis, and it killed off cast members at a standard clip so that the hero could thump on the Predator alone at the end. Seems simple, but it's apparently harder than it looks, since three separate sequels failed to pull it off.

Predators, on the other hand, hit the formula smack on because I think Rodriguez and crew weren't too proud to just plain entertain the crowd. I'd hesitate to say it was a good film. I started ticking off all the ridiculous plot holes as soon as the credits started to roll—but it was a good time in the theater and had me shoveling popcorn into my maw just like it was supposed to. As I said, seems easy, but it's not.

3. *Inception* raked in $62 million in its opening weekend, killing film observers with joy (finally proof that you don't have to be a sequel or a comic-book movie to rake in tons of money) and making them speculate on whether its success signaled a turning away from the tired formula of sequels, series, and remakes which seems to be sputtering this season.

My thought on this was two-fold. As nice as it would be to think sequels and remakes would get a rest, a quick look at the current top five films of the year—*Toy Story 3*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Iron Man 2*, *Eclipse*, and *Shrek Forever After* (four sequels and a remake)—suggests that the formula may not be

as tired as some might hope *Inception*'s clearly going to do well but, if it cracks the top ten for the year as an original film it'll be in the minority.

It's also worth noting that as much as Christopher Nolan is a seriously talented director who would be successful one way or another one hopes,, it wasn't just his talent that made it possible for him to make *Inception*. It was also the fact that his last film—a sequel based on a comic book character—made a billion dollars worldwide. In other words, *Inception* is the $160 million hard-to-describe science fiction head trip that *The Dark Knight* built. This doesn't justify all the sequels and remakes flooding the market, to be sure. But it does kind of take the edge off.

4. Right now, the number one science fiction movie of the year is *Iron Man 2*. Number two? *Despicable Me*. Hey, when a dude plans to shrink the moon, that qualifies as science fiction.) *Inception* will probably be number three by this time next week. But for now, you know what the third most successful science fiction film of the year is? *The Book of Eli*. And you're all like what? And I'm like, dude, I know. But it's true: this postapocalyptic Denzel Washington flick grossed just shy of $100 million when apparently no one was paying attention—which is to say in January, usually one of the deader times of the year for films and this year also when *Avatar* was rampaging through theaters. It just goes to show that not every film that does well does so loudly.

And now I'm done with my random thoughts. So I'll stop writing. That, too, is part of the gig.

—July 21, 2010 Next 339, Previous 103

What's Really Scary in Science-Fiction Film

A timely question via e-mail:

> As Halloween is coming up, can you tell us what's scary to you? And are there science fiction movies that have this thing in it?

One way to answer this question would be to take it on a surface level and say, Oh horrible tentacled aliens scare me, or ghosts scare me, or zombies. But if you don't mind I'd like to address this on a slightly more existential level, because the fact is that ghosts and zombies and horrible tentacled aliens don't actually scare me at all. I remember watching the first *Alien* movie when I was 10 years old at a drive-in—we had those back then!—and not being in the least bit scared—although I thought it was awesome when the chest burster popped out. But that was an entirely different emotion, you see. My point is that even as a little kid I knew I was looking at special effects.

So what scared me—and what scares me now—isn't monsters or gory special effects. What really spooks me in a horror movie, science fictional or otherwise, is the loss of self—transforming into something else, something you don't want to be and that you have no control over and that eventually takes over your life, until there is no you left. Yes, obviously, this is a window into my soul—into all my deep-seated neuroses, and I should probably talk with someone about them and work through them. (Not I then, though—man, that crap creeps me out.)

What science fiction films spook me because of this "loss of self" thing? Let me tell you.

The Fly: This one goes right to the top of the list because you know what? Jeff Goldblum's scientist character *hates* the loss of self—not intentionally, of course, but as a direct result of his own emotional state and personality flaws. It's also at the top of the list because it's a genuinely good movie and a truly frightening portrayal of one man's descent into becoming some other thing, one part/one transformation at a time. As a geek I enjoy the excellent makeup and special effects, but as a viewer it's Goldblum's self-inflicted loss of humanity that gets me every time.

28 Days Later...: It's the film that took the idea of the fast zombie into the mainstream, but what makes it spooky to me is that it also speeds up the zombification process so that the change from you to rage-filled killer zombie almost literally happens in the blink of the eye. This is made explicit in more than one heartrending scene, and I won't say more for those three of you who have not yet seen this film. But it's that rapidity that freaked me out the most and kept rolling around in my brain well after I saw the movie.

The Thing: I pick this film for itself (and because I still love watching the head sprout spider legs and try to scuttle away), but it's also a stand-in for the whole

"body snatcher" genre of film in which you are replaced by an alien thing that looks like you acts like you, and may even think it's you but isn't. That's doubly spooky. This is also the subgenre that really ramps up my latent paranoia that there's someone else in the universe just like me and he's going to show up at my door one day. With a knife. Yes, I know. Therapy will help with this. Look. I don't need you to tell me these things.

Re-Animator: So you're dead. Which is bad enough. But then some mad scientist jerk reanimates your tissues and you come back just like you, only slightly decayed, and evil. My question is, is it really you? Because, remember, you're dead. Even if the revenant has your memories and some of your personality, it's not a given that the creature now shambling about in your body, planning to do terrible, terrible things, is you. But you'll still probably be blamed for its atrocities. And again, you're dead, so you probably won't care. But even so.

Re-Animator never actually scared me; it's too campy for that. But the philosophical question of whether your body qualifies as you is positively Cartesian. Perhaps we should reanimate Descartes and ask him. That is, if we can be positive that his first act wouldn't be to try to stab us in the brain.

—October 27, 2010 Next 27, Previous 351

An Experiment in Accurate But Misleading Movie Descriptions

There's a famous television listing for *The Wizard of Oz* written by newspaperman Rick Polito, which goes like this: "Transported to a surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first person she meets and then teams up with three strangers to kill again." It's amusing because, despite not being the way that one usually describes *The Wizard of Oz*, it is, in fact, an accurate summation of the story. Accurate but misleading.

And of course it's easy to do it with science-fiction films as well: "Disaffected farm boy destroys military installation, killing thousands," is, for example, an accurate but misleading description of *Star Wars*, giving the impression that it's a different kind of film than it really is. If nothing else, this sort of exercise makes you look at your favorite films in a new light.

With that in mind, here are some accurate but misleading descriptions of popular science-fiction films. Enjoy.

2001: A Space Odyssey: A well-meaning computer's attempt to fulfill its mission runs afoul of a human crew with other plans.

Alien: A rambunctious alien child invites itself aboard a human cargo ship, a memorable game of hide-and-seek follows.

Aliens: Humans and aliens join together to raise alien youth, but the marines take exception to their methods.

Alien 3: A lady and a stowaway change the lives of lonely prisoners forever.

Avatar: A company attempts to solve the Earth's ecological woes, unhelpful aliens interfere with the task.

Back to the Future: A bewildered teenage boy fends off his mother's disturbing and unnatural attraction to him.

Blade Runner: Poor product design leads to trouble for a manufacturer and one exasperated policeman. Note: this is also the description for *I, Robot*.

Cloverfield: A group of hipster Manhattanites find their plans for the night completely overturned thanks to an unexpected visit from an out of towner.

Escape From New York: A former soldier tries to find someone in the Big Apple but is frequently distracted by the colorful locals and their interesting lifestyle choices.

E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial: An interloper endangers the life of a small boy in a desperate attempt to get home.

I Am Legend: A New Yorker has trouble getting along with his neighbors, especially at night.

Inception: An eclectic group of dreamers meet a poor little rich boy and try to change how he feels about losing his father.

Independence Day: Humans and aliens engage in a dispute over resource management.

Jurassic Park: A couple tries to have a good day at an amusement park and is thwarted by faulty ride management.

Logan's Run: A young man seeks to discover if he can ever trust someone over 30.

Men in Black: A cop joins the immigration service and loses his sense of identity and his place in the universe.

Planet of the Apes: An astronaut shows a civilization the errors of its prejudiced ways but discovers that the ways of his own people aren't always perfect.

Star Trek: The Motion Picture: A child's attempt to find his parents leads to misunderstandings on a galactic scale.

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home: Time travelers attempt to steal an endangered species just to save their own behinds.

Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace: A floppy eared alien meets two robed humans who take him on a series of increasingly disturbing adventures, including an attempt to acquire a small boy on a bet.

Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones. A budding romance between a man and a woman is threatened by her political career and his job in a paramilitary operation.

Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith: An ambitious young man's career choices confound his wife and his immediate supervisor.

The Fly: Lax operating standards in a laboratory lead a scientist to change the way he lives his life.

The Matrix: A lonely programmer discovers he's spending more time in a massive multiplayer online game than he ever suspected.

The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions: The owners of a popular immersion video game fight outside attempts by technophobes to shut it down.

The Terminator: A robot with a funny accent goes looking for a woman in eighties Los Angeles.

The Thing: A visitor tries to blend in with the crew of an Antarctic base but find attempts to become one of the guys is met with suspicion and resistance.

Transformers: A young man's desire for a car involves him in a philosophical dispute between two metalheads.

WALL-E: An employee at a garbage dump abandons his job to pursue a woman he's just met.

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Saying Thanksgiving Grace, the Science-fictional Way

Dear Great and Gracious Lord,

This Thanksgiving we pause to reflect on all the bounty and good fortune with which you have graced us this year. Thank you, Lord, for this feast we have in front of us and for the family and friends who are with us today to enjoy this bounty and this day with us, even our Cousin Chet. Thank you for our health and for our happiness.

We also thank you for the world and that in your wisdom you have not stopped the Earth's core from rotating, collapsing our planet's magnetic field and causing microwaves from the sun to fry whole cities, requiring a plucky band of scientists to drill down through the mantle and start the core's rotation with nuclear bombs. That seems like a lot of work, so we are pleased you've kept the Earth's core as it is.

We also thank you for once again not allowing our technology to gain sentience, to launch our own missiles at us, to send a robot back in time to kill the mother of the human resistance, to enslave us all, and finally to use our bodies as batteries. That doesn't even make sense from an energy management point of view, Lord, and you'd think the robots would know that. But in your wisdom you haven't made it an issue yet, so thank you.

Additionally, let us extend our gratitude that this was not the year that you allowed the alien armadas to attack, to rapaciously steal our natural resources, and to feed on us, obliging us to make a last-ditch effort to infect their computers with a virus relying on microbes to give them a nasty cold, or moisten them vigorously in the hope that they are water soluble. I think I speak for all of us when I say that moistening aliens was not on the agenda for any of us at this table. Thank you, Lord, for sparing us that duty.

Our further thanks to you, our Lord, for not allowing the aliens to invade one at a time and conquer us by taking us over on an individual basis. That you in your wisdom have not allowed aliens to quietly inhabit our bodies and identities—the better to attack us by conferring us in the rec room or outside while having a smoke—means that we can enjoy each other's company without unwarranted paranoia. It also means that if we're obliged to set a flame thrower on Cousin Chet—as we are sometimes tempted to, we will not scream flaming head sprout arms and try to scurry away. And for that we are truly blessed.

Thank you for not allowing the total moral and economic decline of the United States, our Lord, that would turn one or two of our great cities into a prison or spur any number of apocalyptic scenarios upon us that would turn our planet into a vast wasteland where only dune buggies and leather-clad miscreants have survived. It's not that we have anything against leather-clad miscreants—I refer you, Lord, to the previously mentioned Cousin Chet—but we prefer them to be in the minority, and as to those dune buggies, so rarely have seat belts—that's just not safe.

Most specifically, thank you, Lord, for not sending a large meteor or comet tumbling straight at the planet, forcing the government to turn to oil rig operators to save us all. That oil rig in the Gulf this year didn't exactly inspire confidence. If you know what I mean, Lord. And while we know that humanity would likely survive such a massive impact thanks to those underground cities the government has built, we are not at all confident that any of us at this table would get a pass into those cities, and we don't have either dune buggies or wardrobes made mostly of animal hide. So thank you, Lord, for not making us worry about that this year.

Finally, Lord, thank you for once again keeping the scientists from bioengineering dinosaurs back to life. While the idea of a pterodactyl with stuffing and all the trimmings seems like a good one at first blush, getting past the raptors in the supermarket parking lot would probably be a challenge, and we would end up having to stake one of our own to the shopping cart return so the rest of us could get past, and I'm not sure that we could persuade Cousin Chet to do that more than once.

For these and so many other things, Lord, we offer our humble gratitude to you this Thanksgiving. However, I think I speak for everyone when I say we would still like speeder bikes, so if you could get someone to invent those by Christmas we would all be obliged. Amen.

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An Experiment in Accurate But Misleading Movie Descriptions—Fantasy Version

And now an indignant e-mail:

> Your "Accurate But Misleading Science Fiction Movie Descriptions" a couple of weeks ago were amusing but your flagrant anti-Fantasy bias sickens me. Lest we fantasy fans are required to burn you in effigy, you must now produce a set for fantasy films.

Well, I don't want to burned in effigy or otherwise, so let's correct this right away. For those of you just coming in, the idea here is to come up with short descriptions of films that are technically correct but that nevertheless give a different perspective on the film than is usually given. This idea isn't original to me, of course. I'll trace the idea back to writer Rick Polito, who continues his efforts these days on his Twitter feed. But inasmuch as I don't get paid for letting other people write my column, I'm making up the following on my own.

So here are some accurate but misleading movie descriptions for twenty of your favorite fantasy films or series, both live-action and animated.

A Christmas Carol: A successful capitalist is browbeaten into altering the practices that have brought him financial security.

Beauty and the Beast: A young girl meets a rich older man with a skin condition and convoluted past. Complications ensue.

Beetle Juice. A young girl meets a rich older man with a skin condition and convoluted past. Complications ensue.

Clash of the Titans: After the death of his adoptive parents, a young man becomes reluctantly enmeshed in the problems of his biological family.

Coraline: In order to gain acceptance, a young woman flirts with the practice of body modification.

Ghost: A woman's former lover is reluctant to allow her to begin another relationship and plots to discredit her new potential mate.

Ghostbusters: A trio of disgraced academics come up with a plan to evict New York's oldest residents for cash.

Harry Potter Series: Three friends continually disrupt the academic calendar at a small boarding school, earning them the enmity of those trying to reform its practices.

Highlander: Very old men wander through New York City trying to finish up a competition they entered years before.

Indiana Jones Series: A professor abuses his tenured position to undertake academically questionable trips that rarely produce verifiable results.

King Kong: A creature of the country expresses his displeasure with planes and architecture during a trip to New York City.

Labyrinth: A would-be adoptive parent is surprised when the baby's biological family wants the child back.

Shrek: A real estate dispute leads to a ruler being consumed by a wild animal on the day of his wedding.

Sleeping Beauty: A young man hatches a plan to marry an heiress with a neurological disorder.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: A fugitive from the law invades a home but the tables are turned when the occupants make her their domestic servant.

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: A quartet of invaders launch a coup in a foreign land and in doing so utterly alter its fragile climate.

***The Lord of the Rings* Series:** A long-absent metalworker wants back his favorite trinket to the dismay of those who illegally possess it.

The Nightmare Before Christmas: An ambitious manager's plan to extend his brand produces unexpected results.

***Twilight* Series:** A young girl meets a much older man with a skin condition and convoluted past. Complications ensue.

Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory: The proprietor of a "closed shop" production facility attempts to evade scrutiny by naming as its administrator someone too naïve to challenge the status quo.

—December 8, 2010 *Next 199, Previous 105*

Why I Can't Get Outraged Over *Transformers*

In the e-mailbag this week, a veritable taunt:

> In reading your list of science fiction movies you're looking forward to in 2011 I can't help notice that you left out *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. Denial isn't just a river in Egypt, Scaz! Go on and admit you love the Transformers. You'll feel better about yourself. Promise.

No, really—I went to go see the next Transformers film primarily because, hey, I have a gig as a science fiction film columnist, so I do try to see every major science fiction film I can, even the ones I reasonably expect will be as painful as thrusting my head into a bag of wet, angry cats. Given my opinion of the cinematic track record of the Transformers movies and director Michael Bay in general, I recall that I called the last Transformers film the "drunken frat boy of science fiction flicks"—there's a better than even chance that, indeed, *Dark of the Moon* will be more painful to me than the patented Burlap Sack of Monstered Feline Fury. I want you all to appreciate the sacrifices I make in the line of duty.

For all that, I find it difficult to be morally outraged that (a) there will soon be a third Transformers film out there, (b) Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks threw a couple hundred million down into a hole to make it, and (c) it will likely make close to a billion dollars worldwide in movie theaters, if the other two films in the series are anything to go by. I try to muster some outrage about it, and yet I just can't seem to.

Why? To start, the films were never meant for me. First, I was too old for Transformers when they came out—I was in high school—so I don't have any hazy childhood memories of either the plastic toys or the truly abysmal eighties animated film. Second, by the time the first movie came out, I was in my late twenties, which meant that *Transformers*, a PG-13-for-boys below-25 charms were largely lost on me, including those of Megan Fox, who at this stage inspires in me not lust but rather the desire to offer her a muffin and a year of college tuition. Third, while I can appreciate that Michael Bay actually has a coherent film grammar—no, seriously—it's not one that appeals much to me because, among other things, I like to actually see what's happening in an action sequence.

And you know all of this is fine. *Transformers* isn't made for me, but then neither is say the latest Tyler Perry movie or any installment of Saw or whatever dreary pimp of cinema fare your friends are making this year. Lots of films aren't explicitly tailored to my cinematic predilections. If they happen to work for me despite that, then great. I'm open to trying things I don't think I'll like because it's nice to be surprised. But if they don't work for me, I can't find it in my heart to get worked up about it. To be honest, I'm more irritated with Bay for screw-

ing up *The Island* which could have been right up my alley if it hadn't been terrible—than for anything he's done in the Transformers movies.

Beyond this, I don't labor under the delusion that the series is taking money from something more worthy. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, which got my vote as one of the worst science fiction films of the last decade, cost something in the area of $200 million to produce. That's roughly 40 to 50 times as much as *Moon*, the lovely movie by Duncan Jones that I think was one of the best films of 2009. But this does not mean that 40 *Moons* would have been produced had *Fallen* never been made. Hollywood doesn't work that way. If a crew of tasteful science-fiction fans went back in time to 2007 and stopped *Transformers* from ever being made, all that would likely mean is that Paramount and DreamWorks would find something else expensive and possibly dumb to make into a tentpole production—i.e., something to bring in gobs of money to a studio over the course of three or four films.

Not every tentpole production is dumb—see the current iteration of Batman, the Harry Potter films, and even so far at least the Iron Man movies as examples—but it's fair to say that as far as tentpole films are concerned, brains are not the highest consideration. Which is a shame, yes, but it is what it is. We can argue whether this sort of business model is correct or smart or fiscally responsible, but at the end of the day, studios want big, fat tentpole movies for the summer and holidays. A movie like *Moon* ain't gonna cut it for that. But an explode-y robot movie based on toys beloved by boys? Just back up the armored truck and shovel in the cash.

So no, I'm not going to admit to looking forward to *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. Really, really, really not. But if you're looking forward to it, knock yourself out, kids.

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Science-Fiction-Movie Musicals—My Fantasy Picks

A number of years ago on *The Simpsons*, the show featured a parody musical based on *Planet of the Apes* (It was awesome.) While that animated parody almost certainly spelled doom for any real attempt to make a musical of that film (or films if you consider the sequels and the remake), the fact is that science-fiction musicals are not a priori a terrible idea.

Yes, right now *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* is flailing all over Broadway, but before that memorable mess there was *Little Shop of Horrors*, *The Rocky Horror Show* (which is better known by the film title, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), and the Tony-winning *Urinetown*. And there was also *Young Frankenstein*, which, while not a hit the size of of those previous plays, nevertheless had a decent run on Broadway and garnered three Tony nominations. So science fiction musicals can be done—and can be hits—as long as they're done right.

With that in mind (and excepting poor *Planet of the Apes*), here are my suggestions for five science fiction films that I think could probably make the transition from the silver screen to the floodlit stage.

Cocoon:

This hit 1985 film about senior citizens rejuvenated by alien contact is a natural for the stage. First, it's character driven and tailor made for hammy older actors. Second, the film itself already features at least one standout musical scene (i.e., Don Ameche breakdancing). Third, its story could be reasonably well contained to a stage (there are no runs down a Death Star trench, as it were). Finally, it's a bittersweet meditation on life and mortality, which is right in the musical theater sweet spot.

Dune:[2]

What? You don't want small-scale musical theater? You want it big—really big? *Dune* fits the bill here. It's a galaxy-spanning epic that involves war, politics, royal intrigue, murder, assassination, a young man coming of age and avenging his father, and really large worms. (This is an point of fact the *Les Mis* of potential science fiction film musicals and should be presented in that very same huge, bombastic, overblown fashion. Yes, some time ago I joked about the idea of *Mad Dub: The Musical* starring Hugh Jackman as Paul. But you know what? It's really not a horrible idea. Well, that particular title is. But a *Dune* musical? Done right, it could run for years.

Logan's Run:[3]

The flip side to the *Cocoon* musical up above, the story here is about two people fleeing a civilization where everyone's young and beautiful and blown up the day they turn 30. Anyone who's seen the film remembers it as an example of everything that was aesthetically horrifying about the seventies, but I think that

it would be oddly compelling on the stage especially if the music also captured the disco era as well. The only question for the producers would be how much camp to inject into the endeavor. In this, they may wish to have the recent musical production of *Xanadu* as their guide.

Men in Black:[4]
Will Smith's Grammy winning theme song to the 1997 film shows the way here. Take this buddy comedy, get some top-flight puppeteers for the aliens, and load the play from top to bottom with rap, soul, and New Jack Swing. It's really hard to see how this one could miss. In fact, the only reason for this not to get made right away is that Will Smith is holding out until his son Jaden is old enough to play the Agent J role. Won't be that long now.

The Truman Show:[5]
The idea of cameras following around an unsuspecting subject 24 hours a day seemed only slightly outlandish in 1998, when the film came out, and seems merely prescient today, just thirteen years later. But the story itself—about a man's growing awareness that his world isn't what he thought it was and his attempts to free himself and discover the truth—is eminently adaptable to the stage, which as an artificial world designed to mimic the real one adds an extra layer of meta right there. Lots of opportunities to break the fourth wall and play with the format.

And if someone does read this and make these into musicals, remember to send me two tickets to opening night, Orchestra seating, please. I thank you in advance.

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For an Ice Storm, Warm Planets From the SciFi Universe

So as I'm writing this column I have a weather Web site open in another tab, and it's showing me a Winter Storm Warning. Not one that goes like this: **COLD, WINTRY DEATH IS BEARING DOWN UPON YOU. YOU WILL BE TRAPPED INSIDE YOUR HOUSE FOR MONTHS AND WILL HAVE TO CHOOSE WHICH PET TO CONSUME. THE DOG LOOKS MEATY. WARNING: THE DOG IS THINKING THE SAME THING ABOUT YOU.** Bear in mind I'm paraphrasing a bit, but, really, that's the gist of it.

It's times like these that I wish I were somewhere else. Not California or Hawaii or Australia. Some place really far away, where snow and ice and the various yetis camping out on my lawn don't exist, and winter is nothing but a horrible fairy tale they tell bad children about to get them to behave. Places such as you will find in science fiction films. Below you will find some of the places where I dream of avoiding winter, with the benefits—and occasional drawbacks—of each.

Arrakis: (*Dune*)
Pros: You like blue skies? Arrakis has got them, with an average of 365 cloud-less days a year. The low humidity and pollen counts are beneficial to those who suffer from allergies. The local indigenous culture is very spiritual and in touch with the planet. The endless desert is hypnotically beautiful. Great planet to work on that tan. And if you like spicy food, well, this is definitely the place.
Cons: Outside the cities, things get a little dicey. Upstart rebels may seek to ruin your peaceful vacation. It's best not to bring up politics at all, frankly. Much of the population is addicted to a local drug and may try to push it on you. You may find it difficult to stay hydrated. Watch where you step or you may be consumed by a very large worm.

Dagobah *Star Wars: Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back*
Pros: Perfect for those who like their swamps steamy and scary, this jungle planet gives you that wet, clinging, fecund feeling all year long. It's sparsely populated for those who like their privacy, but the locals are friendly and might invite you over for a home-cooked meal. The budding herpetologist within you will be delighted by the local fauna. That steam coming off the water means it's always the right temperature for a long soak.
Cons: The natives' mangling of grammar and syntax suggests that the local school system leaves much to be desired. It's hard to find decent parking. The only building on the planet comes with very low ceilings. Local fauna will want you to see them from the inside. Occasional pockets of the Dark Side of the Force may cause discomfort, hallucinations, and deeply symbolic lightsaber duels.

Pandora: (*Avatar*[5])
Pros: Looks just like warm, wonderful Hawaii. At Hawaii glowed in the dark. There's amazing biological diversity. Look up and there's always something in the sky, whether it's a large flying creature or the gas giant that Pandora orbits. It has a truly unique global information system. Lighter local gravity means you're lighter on your feet. The local human outpost has all the creature comforts of home.
Cons: Humans on the planet have tense, oil-fueled relationship with the natives who may wish to impale you on an arrow just on general principle. The local animals are happy to hug you with their teeth. The air is poisonous, which puts a damper on sunbathing, and it takes six years to get there, which puts it out of reach for weekend getaways.

Vulcan: (*Star Trek*)
Pros: Looks like New Mexico, so if you like that southwestern kind of vibe, this is the place. The locals are highly intelligent and well-educated with a distinctive culture. A perfect place for meditation and self-examination.
Cons: Locals are famously lacking a sense of humor, so your "Hot enough for you?" jokes will always fall flat. Depending on which timeline you're in, Vulcan may have been consumed by a black hole, which will make total relaxation difficult. In either timeline, a totally dead party scene.

And you say, "Well, what about Tatooine?" Man, don't even get me started on that place. It has two suns and a low standard of living and is run by a feckless mob boss. The cities are wretched hives of scum and villainy. If you go to the bars, you're likely to get shot at or have your arm sliced off. Plus every time I go to Tosche Station, there's always this annoying teenager there whining about power converters. Thanks, but no. I'd rather sit here in the snow than go there.

—February 2, 2011 Next 355, Previous 163

Science Fiction vs. Science Fantasy

Last weekend, I was in the Chicago area as the guest of honor at Capricon, a science-fiction convention. While I was there I (naturally enough) sat on a panel about science fiction films. During the question-and-answer period, one of the audience members brought up a complaint that I hear frequently whenever I'm on a panel about science-fiction movies—namely, that some films labeled science fiction aren't really and should be labeled something else, that something else usually being "science fantasy."

The reasoning is typically this: the phrase "science fiction" generally implies that whatever you're seeing on the screen is at least in some way related to science, i.e., that there's a rational reason things work the way they do and that actual physical laws and observable scientific principles apply or at least are bowed to with respect. But some films, despite spaceships or whatever, hardly nod to science at all and therefore don't deserve the "science fiction" label. For the record, the films that are almost always used as an example of science fantasy are the *Star Wars* films, although other films may occasionally be offered; the Transformers films are excellent science fantasy candidates, for example.

As this argument pops up often, I understand that people get worked up and feel fervent about it, but I personally have a number of problems with the science-fantasy argument with regards to films.

1. Simply to be completely nitpicky about the wording, I say if you're going to complain about science fantasy not actually having science in it, you should probably jettison the word "science" and call it something like "space fantasy." Every time someone uses the phrase "science fantasy" in this manner, the first thing that always pops into my brain is how they're not actually paying attention to the construction of the phrase. This is pedantic, I know, but then the space-fantasy argument is inherently pedantic, so there you are.

2. To engage in further nitpicking, everything you can possibly label as "science fiction" is in fact just a subset of a larger genre which is correctly called "fantasy." This is because science fiction, along with supernatural horror, alternate history, superhero stuff, and the elves and orcs swashbuckling typically labeled "fantasy," is fundamentally fantastic. Which is to say, it involves imaginative conceptualizing, does not restrain itself according to what is currently known, and speculates about the nature of worlds and conditions that do not exist in reality. It may gall science-fiction fans to think of their genre as a subset of fantasy, but it is, so calling a film "science fantasy" is in most ways redundant.

3. While I personally groan when science fiction films get the science wrong and applaud when they get it right (because it's not that hard to get it right), I'm also aware that going to a movie to understand science is like going to a movie to understand history: a really spectacularly bad idea. Movies are about

entertainment and when filmmakers are confronted with a choice between accuracy and entertainment it's generally a no brainer (pun intended) which way they will go. Moreover, even if filmmakers contended that their sketchy science is plausible, they're usually not going to stop a movie for explanatory scenes. Some of us geek out about how lightsabers could work, but most people paying money for a *Star Wars* film don't want five minutes of Darth Vader and Luke talking shop about the crystals in their sabers. They just want to get to the part where body parts go flying.

4. All science-fiction films play fast and loose with science to some extent—it's inherent in the phrase "science fiction"—so which science fiction films qualify as science fantasy is a matter of personal choice and where one's scientific tolerances lie. As an example: when the *Star Wars* films are dismissed as science fantasy, the *Star Trek* films are often held up as a counterexample of science fiction. If you ask me, however, the last *Star Trek* film, with its absolutely appalling representation of science, is more a work of science fantasy than, say, *The Phantom Menace*, which tried to give a rational explanation for the Force (*i.e.*, those damned midi-chlorians).

5. What the science-fantasy argument is really about is snobbery. "This film doesn't sit well with me, and I want to exclude it from the genre I love, so I'm calling it something else." This is ironic, as science fiction fans complain that the gatekeepers of cultural respectability do the same thing to them. "If it's science fiction, it can't be good, and if it's good it can't be science fiction." Well, science fiction can be good, but sometimes it's bad, whatever one's personal definition is of "bad."

Personally, I posit that science fiction comes in all sorts of flavors, some of which will not be to my own personal taste. When it isn't, it's still science fiction.

—February 16, 2011 Next 201, Previous 355

Replacing the Bunny—Finding a New Easter Creature in SciFi Films

Easter is on its way, and for many of us that calls up memories of being a small child, happily waiting for the Easter bunny to arrive with his basket of treats, which we would then consume in a massive gulp, all the better to spend the day heavily wired on sugar. Good times, good times. At least until the sugar crash and stomachache at around 4 p.m. But in the meantime, woo-hoo! Candy!

But let's suppose, just for the fun of it, that one year our friend the Easter bunny found himself indisposed on the big day and was unable to perform his annual task of delivering Easter baskets to eager children. Who could take his place? Or perhaps more to the point, *what* could take his place? As it happens, science fiction film offers a lot of potential candidates for a replacement Easter creature. Let's look at some of them now.

Ewoks, *Return of the Jedi*:

Pluses: Cuddly and furry, like the Easter bunny. Mastery of ropes and vertical environments makes them adept at delivering things in today's increasingly urban world. Postdelivery party will be full of song and magically appearing dead Jedis.

Minuses: Ewok delivered Easter baskets likely to be snatched by obsessive-compulsive *Star Wars* nerds who will rationalize their theft by pointing out that the kids will try to consume their treats, thereby decreasing the baskets' values. George Lucas will digitally redo Easter to make it look like Hanukkah: the chocolate bunny ears first.

Easter-Bunny-Replacement Rating: Three eggs (out of five)

Vulcans, *Star Trek*:

Pluses: This highly logical race will have no problem computing the best route to most efficiently deliver Easter treats over the course of one day, their pointy ears will remind children of elves, which are magical creatures, just like the Easter bunny; if unruly children or dogs interrupt the delivery, the Vulcan nerve pinch will come in handy.

Minuses: Vulcans most likely to point out to children that there is no logical reason for a rabbit to be delivering either eggs or candy, thereby ruining the idea of the Easter bunny for everyone; unlikely to be comforting when children, upon being informed of these facts, break down in weeping sobs; probably best not to let them talk about Santa Claus either.

Easter Bunny-Replacement Rating: Two eggs

Aliens, *Alien*:

Pluses: Move quickly and stealthily, which makes them perfect for the job of getting in and out of houses with Easter baskets; already have experience presenting humans with eggs.

Minuses: Children are supposed to eat the eggs, not the other way around.

Easter-Bunny-Replacement Rating: No eggs

Transformers, *Transformers*:[4]

Pluses: Easter eggs and candy likely to transform into cars and planes and tanks and such, delighting children of all ages.

Minuses: Easter baskets likely to explode for no reason, small chance an Easter basket will be delivered not by a Transformer but a slumming John Turturro wearing bunny ears and a hangdog expression that implies he really knows better.

Easter-Bunny-Replacement Rating: Two eggs

Terminators, *The Terminator*:[5]

Pluses: Cannot be bargained or reasoned with, don't feel pity, remorse or fear, absolutely will not stop ever, until all the Easter baskets are delivered, the T-1000 model is particularly good at delivering Easter baskets to hard to reach places.

Minuses: That whole, you know, "kill all the humans" thing.

Easter-Bunny-Replacement Rating: One egg

The Matrix, *The Matrix*:[6]

Pluses: Is already everywhere, which if you think about it makes Easter-basket delivery really easy; the virtual nature of the baskets means the Matrix can fill them with the most expensive and delicious candies imaginable, and heck if it really wanted to, the Matrix could make every day Easter, which should make candy-hungry children seize with joy.

Minuses: You're enslaved to a computer system using you as a battery, putting your sugar rush into disturbing perspective; if you escape you have to live in Zion, where the Easter baskets are filled with synthesized protein goop.

Easter-Bunny Replacement Rating: One egg

Wall-E, *Wall-E*:[7]

Pluses: Fairly adorable, in a robotic sort of way; general good nature and consistent work ethic in line with Easter delivery gig; guaranteed not to get hungry and snack on the baskets.

Minuses: It's a garbage compactor, and its best friend is a cockroach; raising nontrivial issues regarding cleanliness when panicked; may crush the Easter baskets into cubes.

Easter-Bunny-Replacement Rating: Three eggs

Hmmm. On second thought, maybe it's best just to stick with the bunny.

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On *Thor* and More—A Mid-Tour Mailbag

You can't tell this just by looking at the type, but the fact is that I'm not writing this from home—I'm writing this on the road, where I am currently on tour promoting my book. Touring is fun, but it also takes up most of the brain, leaving it incapable of thinking up big meaty column subjects. You know what that means: to the mailbag!

First question:

> A couple of weeks ago you posted a column about upcoming films and whether you were looking forward to them or not. Do you think it's fair to grade films like that, when you haven't seen them yet?

Sure, because I'm not grading the film itself, I'm grading whether, based on what I know about the films, they are ones I think I want to see. These two things are entirely separate. Is it possible that a movie that I'm not looking forward to will surprise me and I'll end up loving it? Sure. Not only is it possible, it's something I'd be happy to have happen. Conversely, there are movies which look interesting to me that will disappoint when I get around to seeing them. That's the nature of expectation.

It's something everyone does—and something every movie studio tries to manipulate. All the trailers and posters and advance stories about the films are designed to make you hungry to see it. If a movie studio is going to go out of its way to try to influence my opinion about a picture before I see it, I feel perfectly fine in having an opinion in the first place. I like any opinion it could be wrong in the long run. But in the meantime, I'm okay having it.

Next question.

> When will superhero movies just die? I am so sick of them.

They'll die when people stop going to them—which is something they don't appear to be doing given *Thor*'s solid $60 million plus debut and decent hold for a second weekend. Alternately, they'll stop when the movies become too expensive to justify, which is a real possibility since the budgets regularly top $100 million before marketing. We've already seen the Spider-Man franchise scale back with a cheaper director and star and a relatively smaller budget, but not every superhero film will lend itself to downsizing.

There's also another option, which is that we'll see the end of the superhero movies when Hollywood exhausts the A-list stable of both the DC and Marvel universes and starts trying to build blockbusters off of marginal B-second string heroes. It's one thing to aim for a half billion in box office with Batman; it'll be

another thing entirely to try to do it with, say, Nightwing. It's not impossible, but that's not the same thing as saying it'll be a sure bet.

Final question:

> Last week you talked about things film can teach you about writing novels. What doesn't film teach you about writing novels?

Well, lots, actually. Films are visual media, so there's no real need, generally speaking, for films to focus on description. A film can show you in a few frames what an author might take several pages to describe—the proverbial picture being worth a thousand words. Films also generally not good at getting into the heads of characters, and while it offers a form of omniscient narrator, the form takes shape via the placement and use of the camera, not necessarily via the skill of the writer. All of these things are useful for a novel writer to know and implement in his or her writing, and films not going to be a way to learn these things.

None of this is particularly surprising; filmmakers and novelists overlap in terms of the skill sets and focus, but there's bits in each case that's not applicable in the other. It's why being a great author is no guarantee of writing a great (or even good or fair) screenplay, and why so many wonderful screenwriters fail badly when they put their hands to long-form prose. They're disciplines that require work and effort to get done, and the more time you spend on one the less time you have to spend on the other. Usually you have to choose which you like more. There are exceptions—*The Princess Bride*'s William Goldman stands out as one—but they're called "exceptions" for a reason.

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Space Travel, the Science-Fiction-Film Way

Remember how last week I noted that I was on a book tour? Well, I'm still on tour. I'm in city number eleven of the tour at the moment (hello New York!) and have one more stop before it's all done. It's exhausting, but it's paid off, since my new novel, *Fuzzy Nation*, managed to claw its way onto the *New York Times*'s hardcover fiction list. So hooray for touring.

But all the touring—and all the attendant travel, not to mention the delays, the screwups, and the wondering when and how I'm going to do laundry whilst on the road—put me in mind to think about travel in science fiction movies and how easy or difficult it is to do in each of them. There are definitely some movie universes in which travel seems to be more congenial than in others. Let's look at some of them, in no particular order.

Star Trek: The universe of the most recent *Star Trek* movie is clearly the easiest to navigate that has ever existed. In the movie, the Enterprise appears to get from the Earth to Vulcan in about the same amount of time it takes me to walk from my front door to my mailbox and back again. It's true that in the movie just about all travel ends with something either blowing up or sucked into a black hole, but that's an element of the plot, not a general consequence of travel.

Star Wars: The *Star Wars* universe runs a close second in terms of ease of travel. Yes, depending on the film, it's run by either a corrupt, collapsing republic or a dictatorial empire, but on the other hand the movies suggest it's possible to get around a huge chunk of the galaxy in the space of a few days—or at the very least, from Hoth to Dagobah in such a short time that a guy using an X-wing to get there doesn't need to take a bathroom break. As with *Star Trek*, lots of this film travel ends poorly, with exploding planets or ships dodging asteroids, but that's not the fault of the travel.

2001: A Space Odyssey: As with many things, space travel here is shown with what appears to be a reasonable amount of accuracy considering what we know of space travel—no warp speed, no artificial gravity, relatively small crew space, and so on. Plus it takes quite a long time to get from the Earth to Jupiter, two planets within the same solar system. As a consequence, this movie introduces the concept of human hibernation, so people can sleep most of the way to their destinations (presumably, without aging, terribly).

It seems like a great idea, but statistically speaking, science-fiction film travel via human hibernation is indisputably the best way to get yourself killed or worse. It certainly was here, when HAL killed off the sleeping spaceship crew in that delightfully polite yet homicidal way of his.

Alien: The universe of *Alien* is the best evidence we have that human hibernation travel kills three times. Ripley goes into deep sleep in order to travel

mostly to unpleasant places; three times, she wakes up to aliens chewing their way through everyone else in the film. After a certain point you'd think she'd just say, "To hell with this. I think I'll stay up."

Pitch Black: The crew and passengers sleep their way across space when their spaceship malfunctions and crashes into a planet where they are consumed by large nasty aliens. Stay awake, people! Stay awake!

Avatar: One of the few films where human hibernation travel does not inherently appear to kill all those who use it. Jake Sully sleeps for six years and seems to be not all that much worse for wear, aside from feeling like he has a hangover. From a technical point of view, space travel in this film does seem to be based more on physics as we know it than most science-fiction films. It takes a long time, and it appears to be done with at least a respectful nod toward the theory of relativity. At least at the end of it you have pretty and/or hunky blue-skinned aliens to enjoy.

WALL-E: Travel is easy in this universe (at the end of the film, a spaceship makes it across a galaxy to the Earth in apparently about ten minutes), but the spaceships aren't really designed to travel so much as they're designed to offer hover lounges and cupcakes in a cup, i.e., getting somewhere in particular is not a strong suit of travel in *WALL-E*. This is actually a somewhat revolutionary idea in science fiction film travel (as is, to be fair, the cupcake in a cup).

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Driving Down the Supernerd Highway With the *Cars* Films

A question this week about last weekend's number one film

> My husband and I went to see *Cars 2* this weekend. It's cute, but we are now having a difference of opinion about what genre of film it is. I say that talking technology means it's science fiction. He says talking cars with no evidence of humans ever existing means it's fantasy. Who's right?

Hmmm. Well, strictly from a marketing point of view, it's neither a science fiction nor a fantasy film, it's a Pixar animated film, which is its own category and its own highly desirable category, since the average domestic box office gross of the previous eleven Pixar films is just under $263 million dollars, and even the runt of the litter, *A Bug's Life*, racked up over $160 million. The Pixar brand is so useful that even those films from the company that are unambiguously science fiction—*The Incredibles* and *WALL-E*—weren't marketed as such; they were marketed as Pixar films. This isn't a complaint, mind you, and even if it were, Disney, which now owns Pixar, would do right to ignore it. It's Jobs's job is selling its films effectively, not in a way that satisfies genre purists.

With that caveat out of the way, and with additional caveat that things are about to get *supernerdy* up in here, let's look at *Cars 2* and its predecessor, *Cars*. The filmmakers at Pixar, as far as I am aware, have been mum about how a world in which anthropomorphized automobiles have become the dominant species on the planet, so we're going to have to do some speculating. Here are the scenarios as I see them:

Scenario One: The Cars movies take place in a world where the cars were initially designed by humans, but the humans have disappeared in some way or another, leaving their automobiles to carry on without them. This strikes me as a reasonable theory for a number of reasons. One, at this point we're loading our cars with all sorts of computer processing power, and we're even now at the point where self-driving cars are legal in one state—Nevada, the Sixty-first out of American states, apparently. And, of course, cars have been talking to us for a while now, telling us to put on seat belts and the like.

It's not that hard to make the leap from where we are today to fully autonomous, self-driving, self-aware automobiles that have outlived the original purpose of ferrying about human beings—whose cultural preferences and biases they would still continue to exhibit without knowing why or even that they are. Whether the humans are gone due to their own hand or due to some automotive uprising in which Skynet and Lightning McQueen are mashed up into the most adorable autopocalypse ever, is perhaps best left unexamined at this point. The point is, if this is the scenario, then the existence of the cars has a rational basis, and the Cars series of movies is indeed science fiction.

Scenario Two: The Cars movies take place in a world where some celestial Henry Ford or Karl Benz reached down from the sky and with a touch of his finger animated the necessarily metal-rich mud into the very first cars. In this world humans never existed, which makes the general morphology of the cars a little puzzling, and which makes one wonder if automobile philosophers (of which there must have been some) ever theorized as to why they all had spaces inside of them clearly designed to convey some sort of creature from one place to another.

No doubt there is a rich vein of automotive teleological debate that has been engaged in over the millennia on just this subject, none of which reaches as the viewers because in the films we're following the adventures of an arrogant rock and his genial but dimmest friend, neither of whom is what you would call the deeply introspective sort. Which is fine; no one expects a Pixar version of *A Man for All Seasons* featuring cars. Be that as it may, in this scenario the Cars movies have a non-rational and magical basis, and would be fantasy.

Scenario Three: The Cars movies take place neither on earth nor on a planet watched over by a mystical creator but on a planet which the processes of evolution have given rise to a metal and internal-combustion-based form of life, the predominant form of which has just happened to, and unbeknownst to them, mirror to an unsettling degree the design of automobiles found here on Earth, not to mention the parallel cultural development. The details and fundamental likelihood of such an evolutionary and cultural path I will leave to others to discuss, except to say, hey, it's a quantum physics universe, and anything can happen. In which case the Cars films are neither science fiction nor fantasy but simply contemporary action comedies.

There's a fourth scenario in which the Pixar filmmakers simply said, hey, talking cars are cool, and gave little if any thought about where the film could be slotted in terms of the science fiction and fantasy genre. But come on. That's the unlikeliest scenario of all.

—June 28, 2011 Last, Previous 37

Movies
Then and Now

With SciFi Movies, Classic Does Not Equal Good

Here's a fun question for you. What is it that sets science fiction apart from every other genre of film? Since you're all smart people, you can assume that the most obvious answer — because it features aliens and flying saucers, *duh!* — is not the answer I'm looking for. No, I'm looking for something more subtle than that, something that makes a nod both to the fundamental nature of film, and the fundamental nature of science fiction in film.

By way of an answer, let me first say what every genre of film has in common. Classics. Comedy has *Some Like it Hot* and *The Philadelphia Story* (to name but two). Westerns have *High Noon* and *Unforgiven*. Suspense and horror: *Psycho* and *The Exorcist*. And so on. No matter the category, you end up with a list of films that are not only classics in the genre, but also excellent motion pictures, period.

Science fiction has its classics, too, from *Metropolis* to *2001* to *Blade Runner*. But what makes science fiction different than every other genre of film — what makes it unique, for better or worse — is that a strangely high percentage of the classics of the genre are not good films, some are just actually flawed in major ways, while others are just plain awful.

Examples? You say. Take the curious case of 1954's *Gojira* — or *Godzilla*, as it is known here in the U.S. Any observant observer of the science fiction genre of film has to acknowledge its significance. It's the progenitor of an entire subgenre of mutated monster films called *kaiju eiga* in Japan, whose influence is actively felt today. (It's years *Cloverfield* is a direct descendant. And, of course, *Gojira*'s monster is also a pop cultural symbol of Japan, not just for the kitsch value, but because it embodies the entire nation's fetish-laced strange ambivalence toward nuclear energy and the destruction it creates. Freud would have had a field day with this giant reptile.

As a movie, *Gojira* is the movie is really and genuinely awful. Bad plot, bad acting, bad science, both in the implausibility of a prehistoric reptile and the method of getting rid of it — oxygen destroyers, and of course some poor bastard stuck in a rubber suit squishing cardboard sets counts as bad production values. The film only got worse when it came to America and Raymond Burr was summarily shoved into the flick so that American drive-in viewers could have a white man to ignore as they necked in the back of dad's Buick.

Gojira and its dozens of sequels are so bad that if there was any honesty in the world, people would have to admit that the universally reviled 1998 Roland Emmerich version is actually the best written, best acted, best produced Godzilla film ever made. No one will ever admit this, *ever*, except for me, and maybe, if he's drunk enough, Roland Emmerich, but there it is. *Gojira* is a classic science fiction film. *Gojira* stinks.

Another example: *Logan's Run*. This 1976 film about a society where people had a 30-year expiration date came out at the tail end of the dystopic era in SF

film that started with *Planet of the Apes* and had the door slammed on it by *Star Wars*. It's possibly the least of the major science fiction films of this era (which also include *Soylent Green*, *The Omega Man* and *A Clockwork Orange*) but it was a big hit and got its share of critical accolades. *2001* it's not, but it has class," opined Roger Ebert. I know folks who argue quite seriously and (alas) accurately that it's a legitimate classic of the genre. But it was silly then, and now—two years past its crystal-flashing birthday—it's actually painful to watch, not only for its script, but for its entire aesthetic which marries the hoary science fiction cliche of tunic wearing with feathered '70s hair.

As a final example I could point out *Star Wars*, but I have to adhere to a word count. Suffice to say everyone who ever winced at Luke Skywalker whining about wanting to go to Tosh Station groks that there are many things about that movie that are *just not good*, never were and never will be.

It's strange that such egregiously bad films are considered classic, but there are reasons. The first, I regret to say, is that for a very long time—from just after 1927's *Metropolis* through 1968's *2001*—the number of truly good science fiction films could be counted on one's fingers. So the entire genre is graded on a curve. But the other thing is that science fiction films—like science fiction literature—value the *idea* over the ideas delivery system. So if you deliver a 150-foot reptile who is the embodiment of the mid-20th Century fear of nuclear annihilation like *Godzilla* or tap into the Baby Boomer terror of the death of its own beautiful youth a la *Logan's Run*, you can get away with letting a lot of other stuff slide like plot, acting and production design.

The real question is: Is this willingness to value the idea at the expense of almost everything else a strength or a weakness of the science fiction film genre? That's a question I'm going to leave open for you.

—June 12, 2008 *Next 209, Previous 177*

Ellen Ripley Paved the Way for Strong Female Leads

This week is a busy one for me, because my most recent novel *Zoe's Tale* hit the stores on Tuesday. I'll be promoting it by making appearances, doing interviews and generally blathering about the main character, a 16-year-old girl who is called upon to save the day, whether she wants the responsibility or not. It was in the course of doing these interviews that I've had cause to think about women's characters in science fiction and the single most important female character in the history of science fiction film: Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* series. What makes her important? Because she's a pivot point in the history of science fiction film, and how women inhabited the genre. In a nutshell—Before Ripley: Barbarella. After Ripley: Sarah Connor.

Becoming Ripley: Ironically, Ripley didn't become this pivotal, iconic character in her first film appearance. 1979's *Alien*. In *Alien*, Ripley's character, third in command on the space freighter *Nostromo*, is initially pretty unsympathetic and unlikeable: the sort of character the other characters dislike for being rule-bound—she refuses to break quarantine even when one of her crewmates gets a surprise alien embryo to the face. In *Alien*, Ripley doesn't take charge so much as have responsibility devolve onto her, the final confrontation ends up being between her and the alien, but to a very real extent, that showdown had as much to do with the then-twenty-something Sigourney Weaver looking tasty as she stripped down to her underwear to slip into a spacesuit as it did with the character surviving simply by dint of her own intelligence and will to live.

It took the 1986 sequel, *Aliens*, for Ripley to become the canonical character she is. In that film, screenwriter-director James Cameron remodeled Ripley, making her something new to science fiction: An action heroine who was neither a female caricature of a macho man nor a Barbarella-like sex bunny. There's nothing particularly sexy about Ripley in *Aliens* at all, in fact, which is something that both makes sense in the context of the film (when you're trying to help a Marine detail fight acid-spewing aliens, there's not much time for the sexy) and which came as something of a revelation to film audiences. Ripley was tough, competent and—here was a surprise—*maternal*. That side of her character becomes activated by the presence the little girl Newt, and expresses itself savagely in the film's final showdown between the Queen alien and Ripley in a human-shaped power lifter.

If you were to suggest to teenage boys just before the release of *Aliens* that the most awesome action scene they'd see in a science fiction film that year would be between two women fighting over the safety of a little girl, they'd probably look at you with blank incomprehension. But there it was: Ripley was an action star not in spite of being a woman, but *because* she was one. The combination of Cameron's writing and Weaver's Oscar-nominated acting—a rare accolade for anyone acting in a science fiction role, much less in a lead actress slot—did

what was previously impossible. Made a female character a bona fide science fiction franchise star.

Carrying on the tradition: Cameron and Weaver's success opened the door to other tough, smart science fiction leading women, the most obvious being another Cameron creation, Sarah Connor. Connor is a fine example of how Ripley changed things for science fiction film women. In the first *Terminator* film, released in 1984, Connor spends nearly all of her time being chased and defended, except for the scene where she gets naked and impregnated. (this scene is actually reasonably tasteful, y done, despite the fact it was in essentially a B-movie.) In 1991's *Terminator 2*, however, she's take charge, dangerous and (literally) crazy competent, and, like Ripley, working from a maternal place. Feminine without the ogle factor for the boys in the audience. It's possible that Cameron always intended her to be this way in a sequel, but it's also a pretty good bet that without Ripley having blazed that trail (and making a lot of money while she did it), Cameron would have gotten a lot more pushback on making Sarah Connor the way she was.

This model has been so successful, in fact, that it's essentially become a standard template for science fiction heroines—around long enough, and successful enough, to be shoddily replicated in bad films. Check out Milla Jovovich's character in 2006's *Ultraviolet*, and you'll note the film doing very poorly what was done so well in *Aliens*. Establishing a female character independent of sexual relationship either with another character or with the males in the audience. (note well that one reason Ultraviolet does a poor job of this relates to Jovovich's wardrobe of midriff-less shirts and hot leather pants). Yes, it's a little perverse to note that success of a character template by pointing out examples of other filmmakers doing it badly. But on the other hand, it's also nice to know that at this point in time, science fiction audiences not only don't have a problem with strong, problem-solving, lead female characters, they've come to expect them to be that way—and they know when such a character is being done badly.

I'm not going to make the argument that science fiction films *don't* indulge in catering to the baser instincts of the teenage boy crowd on a more than occasional basis (please refer once more to Milla Jovovich's hot pants). But thanks to Ellen Ripley and the actress and writers who created her, that's not all we're stuck with. That's worth noting, and with thanks.

—August 21, 2008 *Next 83, Previous 81*

Sound + Vision: Scores That Make Their Science Fiction Films

Last Friday I happened to be in New York City and with some friends went to a screening of the 1927 Fritz Lang science fiction classic *Metropolis*. The showing was accompanied by the Manhattan Sinfonietta performing a new score by Argentine composer Martin Matalon. I say the word "new" advisedly since it was was composed in 1993, however this presentation was the U.S. premiere of the score so it was certainly new enough to me.

Although a silent film, *Metropolis* has not been without music before, mind you, a complete musical score was written for it by German film composer Gottfried Huppertz when it was released. The score became essential for later film historians. *Metropolis* has been so chopped over its history that one of the only ways we know what's missing is to look at the score and see where the holes are (some of the final missing bits of the movie were only recently found in Argentina). Since the 1980s composing or arranging music for *Metropolis* seems to be a growth industry. It's been done five times by folks other than Huppertz or Matalon.

Going back to the Matalon score, I thought it was interesting, if ultimately not especially successful. The instrumentation of the Sinfonietta was appropriate with a mish-mash of electronic and acoustic instruments, and for a fair part of the time, the score matched what was going on upon the screen, particularly the effectively cacophonous opening in which the visuals of a futuristically industrial city were accompanied by the slamming beats of drummers. But the rest of the time the music went blandly electronic which to my mind was no good. Matalon's score was ambitious and interesting, but ultimately it's not right for the movie.

Why It Matters: And yes, of course, as with any movie, it matters. Science fiction, like any genre, gets a kick from the music filmmakers graft onto it because it can act to heighten the emotional impact of what you're watching on screen. To register the difference for yourself, I suggest the following exercise. Go rent (or buy, I'm not picky) the 1931 Universal Pictures version of *Frankenstein* and the 1935 sequel *Bride of Frankenstein*. The 1931 edition barely has music in it (the composer, Bernhard Kaun, went uncredited) and for that reason—among a number of others—the movie seems flat to modern viewers. By 1935, however, Hollywood had figured out the whole "film score" thing, and as a result, again among many other things, *Bride of Frankenstein* is a richer, fuller and better audience experience than its prequel, and indeed, is overall a far better film, but that's a subject for another column entirely. For modern movie-watchers, it really is a night and day experience.

Listening to Matalon's ambitious but flawed score got me thinking of the science fiction film scores that really make a difference for their movies. The most obvious one, of course, is *Star Wars*, whose themes by John Williams are

so monumentally and monolithically successful that at this point you couldn't get away from them if you tried. But I present that one example to get it out of the way, there are other and in some ways better examples as well. Let me offer you a few:

Planet of the Apes: (1968)
This percussive and discordant score by Jerry Goldsmith is one of the true classics not only of science fiction but of film scoring in general, and landed Goldsmith an Oscar nomination. Watch the movie again and note how the music hits all the right notes especially during the run through the fields. Then watch the 2001 version and note how Danny Elfman's score, while competent, is nowhere nearly as effective, or affecting. And I say it as a huge Danny Elfman fan (see page 83, Why Tim Burton's Recurring *Nightmare* Remains So Popular).

The Day the Earth Stood Still: (1951)
Bernard Herrmann (who for film and music buffs needs no introduction) used not one but two theremins in this score, giving science fiction its signature sound (as it were) and also in the process creating one of Hollywood's first nearly fully electronic scores. I feel very sorry for Tyler Bates, who is scoring the upcoming 2008 remake; there's almost nothing he can do to make a score as memorable or influential as Herrmann's, and I wonder if he's even going to try.

2001: A Space Odyssey: (1968)
Not every perfect science fiction score is written for the film — in *2001*, director Stanley Kubrick famously and creatively married existing composed works with his images and did such a spectacular job of it that from now until the end of time Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" will be forever associated with the film. Ironically, the film did have a complete score written for it by composer Alex North, who had scored Kubrick's film *Spartacus*, the music in the film was originally placeholder music. But then Kubrick decided he liked the placeholder music more than North's score, and kept it — and then forgot to tell North, who learned about it when he actually saw the film. Which was a pretty cold way to treat the cat that time five-time Oscar nominated composer. That score was finally released on CD just before North's death in 1991. Having listened to North's score, I can say it's very good. But Kubrick was right to go with the music he did.

—September 25, 2008 Next 181 Previous 211

Do "American" Science Fiction Movies Actually Exist?

A couple of weeks ago I asked folks to feel free to ask me questions I could answer in the column, and I got a bunch. Thanks. Now I'm going to start answering some. And to start off, here's one from Stephen Turner:

> Wondered if you might want to write something about the American approach to science fiction versus versions of sci-fi seen from other parts of the world. Americans have a certain way of approaching sci-fi, and have dominated the majority of sci-fi film due to the genres reliance on big budget effects (which few beyond Hollywood can afford).
>
> But when other countries or cultures have done it, we've got things like Japanese anime such as *Akira*, *Mad Max* or *The Road Warrior* depending on where you saw it from Australia, or the uniquely British sci-fi like *Doctor Who* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (which while directed by an American was more or less British in every other way.)

Well, Stephen, I'm going to do an annoying thing here and not actually *answer* your question, because I think it raises another point. And that is: What you call "American sci-fi" film, I call Hollywood sci-fi film, and I believe—and here cultural conservatives will grin in triumph—Hollywood does not equal American. Let me explain why.

Let's start by noting that science fiction cinema's roots are not American, but European. In the early days Hollywood had a 1916 version of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and the landmark 1925 special effects spectacular *The Lost World* (it had stop-motion dinosaurs). Meanwhile filmmakers overseas produced a raft of special effects laden short silent science fiction, and with the advent of feature length movies work like *Metropolis* and *Frau Im Mond* from Fritz Lang in Germany, *Aelita: The Queen of Mars* in Russia and *High Treason* in the U.K. It wasn't until the 1930s that Hollywood began to catch up.

But here's the thing about Hollywood. Its talent has always come from everywhere, not only the United States. This included the studio heads themselves (MGM's Louis Mayer originally from Russia and then from Canada is a representative sample), as well as the directors, actors, cinematographers and all other heads down. From the very beginning of science fiction's heyday in Hollywood, emigrés made their mark on the genre. Take 1931's *Frankenstein*, which it measures its heritage in science fiction and horror. It was directed by James Whale (British), co-written for the screen by Francis Edward Faragoh (born in Budapest, Hungary), and starred Colin Clive (British, born in France) as Dr. Frankenstein and Boris Karloff (British emigré to Canada) as the Mon-

ster with music by Bernhard Kaun (German) and art direction by Charles D Hall (British). The studio that released *Frankenstein* was Universal, founded by Carl Laemmle originally from Germany. You get the picture.

The cosmopolitan nature of Hollywood science fiction films — and the cosmopolitan nature of Hollywood in general — continues through the decades. *Blade Runner* and *Alien*? Directed by Ridley Scott, a Brit. *Aliens*, *Terminator* and *Terminator 2*? James Cameron is Canadian. *Star Wars* was written and directed by an American, but half the cast was British, and it was filmed primarily at Shepperton and Elstree studios, both in England. The only thing truly American about Hollywood science fiction films is the money — and that's become markedly less so through studio co-financing deals with independent (and often foreign) production companies. Last week Steven Spielberg — certainly an icon of science fiction — left his Dreamworks deal with Paramount Pictures, founded by Adolph Zukor, born in Hungary) to start a new studio financed by the Reliance ADA Group, a conglomerate based in India.

And this is why, to get back to the original comment from Mr. Turner, that *2001: A Space Odyssey* is in fact classically a Hollywood science fiction film: American director, British writer, American studio, filmed at British studios, largely American cast, largely British crew. This is how Hollywood science fiction gets done.

Defining Hollywood science fiction cinema as something apart from American science fiction cinema begs the question. Is there an American science fiction cinema at all? I think there is, although you have to work to parse it out from Hollywood's influence, which kind of (and necessarily) swamps it. Here are a few films I'd nominate as "American" science fiction — which is to say they're American in their sensibility and to a more or less extent, put together by U.S. folk, from U.S. parts (story and so on):

1. *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*. This is a film steeped to the bone with Americana, from the suburban setting to the multilayered play on what it means to be an alien in the U.S. (*E.T.* is bounded by the government and ultimately saturated with American tear-jerking optimism. In fact, if any thing qualifies as American SF film specifically, it might be the unfortunate wave of heart-warming SF films that followed this one, like *Cocoon*, *Short Circuit* and "*batteries not included*", in which case it's just fine other nations do their SF differently.

2. *Men in Black*. Very much in the same vein as *E.T.*, it's an urban setting this time, but weaving around the action and comedy is the commentary about the immigrant experience. Plus Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones are about as American as you can get. And let's not forget the whole "Men in Black" meta-concept to begin with, which is an entirely American mythology.

3. The Flash Gordon serials. The first real American hero in science fiction film (he was originally a polo playing Yale graduate, don't you know), sprung from the newspaper comics page themselves an American invention, having ridiculous adventures chopped up into weekly instalments. Not the first science

fiction movie serial (that would have been a German 1916 serial called *Homunculus*) but the one that endures in memory. The 1980 *Flash Gordon* movie, incidentally, is very much like a typical Hollywood SF production with a UK director, US star, Swedish villain, multinational cast and Italian producer.

Those are my nominations for "American" science fiction films, as opposed to Hollywood science fiction films.

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The Science Fiction B-Movie Hall of Fame: Submit Your Nominations!

The great movies of science fiction. The movies that changed the genre—changed film history—and may have even had a significant impact on your own life.

Yeah, well, today we're not gonna talk about *them*.

Today I want to talk about the other science fiction movies. The cheap ones. The shoddily made ones. The ones if you're old enough to remember the times you ignored while you did *other things* at the drive-in. The ones that had their debut in the "cheap rental" bin of your video store. The ones where you look at the actors on screen and wonder what act of financial desperation drove them to this.

In short: The B movies. Whether a genuine "B" movie (the short, quickly-made feature that played before the "A" movie your grandparents actually paid to see from the '30s–'40s and '50s a me-too exploitation flick from the cashing-in on the success of a blockbuster from the '60s–'70s or '80s or the modern-era direct-to-video third or fourth sequel of a marginally successful theatrical release), the B-movie holds a unique role in the cinematic ecosystem. The movie you didn't really want to see, but are going to watch anyway.

The B movie knows—or more accurately, its makers know—where it sits in the grand scheme of things. It knows that it wasn't your first choice at the video store, and that you got it just because the cool new release was already out, or because you're simply congenitally unable to walk out of the store without five rentals. It knows that its primary audiences are the bored, the undiscriminating and the stoned. It knows that you and your arch-hipster friends will perform your own home-grown version of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* on it as soon as you pop it in the player. It knows *all* these things.

And, of course, that's what makes it *fun*. Because this is the defining characteristic of the B-movie. It's not that it's bad, it's that it is freed from the requirement to be *good*. Why? Because no one actually *cares* if it's good or not—indeed, there's a certain segment of the audience (see: MST3K wannabes) actively *hoping* for bad. And freed from the usual expectations of quality, the B-movie is free to be entertaining by any means possible. It doesn't have to be good. It doesn't have to be art. Hell, they don't even have to make *sense*. They just have to give your eyeballs something to do for 90 minutes.

In Praise of the B-Movie: I come not to mock the B-movie, but to praise it. Because here's the thing: Every once in a while, you'll find a B-movie that's actually really good. It's still a B movie—made for a few million bucks, featuring TV stars and/or women with unrealistic body shapes, special effects that would have been top of the line 15 years ago, trading off the popularity of an unrelated blockbuster—but somewhere along the line, someone actually paid attention and gave the flick something special. A good script, maybe, or perhaps an actual credible performance, or a visual look that implies the director actu-

ally paid attention in his community college film classes. And when you find that, you want to celebrate it.

I'll give you an example. My favorite science fiction B movie is 1980's *Battle Beyond the Stars*, a quickie cashing in on the *Star Wars* craze, produced by B movie king Roger Corman, and made for $2 million, most of that going to stars Robert Vaughn and George Peppard. The hero is played by Richard Thomas, best known to '70s audiences as John Boy Walton. It is what it is. A space opera version of *The Magnificent Seven*, with just enough ooh-aah special effects to keep the kids entertained. And yet, it's a lot better than it should be.

Part of the reason for that is that the filmmakers themselves were unusually talented up-and-comers. The screenplay was by John Sayles, who would later be nominated twice for screenwriting Oscars (for *Lone Star* and *Passion Fish*) and who became a notable director himself. The score was written by James Horner, future two-time Oscar winner. And the co-art director of the film was some dude named James Cameron, whom you may have heard of. All three of these folks would go on to do more and better work in the field of science fiction movies (and movies in general), but it's clear even here that they were better than their budget, and their mission.

Battle Beyond the Stars is not alone. There are other science fiction B movies that are better than you'd expect. I think they deserve recognition. So here's what I propose. We start, here in this space, a **Science Fiction B-Movie Hall of Fame,** recognizing B-movies that, while still B movies, are better than they had to be.

Here's how it will work. You suggest a movie. Just *one*. Be choosy. In the comment thread. In a couple of weeks, I will select five to ten of those and put them into a poll, which everyone will vote in. The top vote getters will then be the inaugural entrants into our Hall of Fame. It'll be a fun way to commemorate the flicks we enjoyed more than we expected.

Got it? Excellent.

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The Science Fiction B-Movie Hall of Fame: Cast Your Vote!

America is getting ready to vote in a presidential election next Tuesday but forget that. I've got something far more important to life on earth as we know it today. A poll for your choices for the Science Fiction B-Movie Hall of Fame! Two weeks ago I asked you all to nominate some of your cheesy favorite science fiction flicks of all time, and you came through with over a hundred comments with suggestions. From these I've culled ten nominees based on (in no particular order) frequency of nomination, enthusiasm for the movie by the nominator, and fundamental cheesiness of the film involved.

I tried to steer away from movies that, while cheesy, were also major productions—for example, 1983's *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone*, which undeniably cheesetastic, was also relatively big-budget and heavily promoted by Columbia Pictures. And since I limited the poll list to ten movies, I couldn't pick everything for this round. But do not worry. If this goes off well, we'll do this again.

And now. Your nominees, and selected comments from the nominators. Read the reasons, and then cast your vote. The two movies which receive the highest number of votes will ascend to the Science Fiction B-Movie Hall of Fame. I'm sure the filmmakers would be proud. In chronological order:

***Robot Monster* (1953) TioChan:** The last family on Earth have to contend with man-eating dinosaurs, a food shortage, and a space helmet wearing gorilla from outer space armed with a caucinator ray and a bubble machine who wants them dead!"

***The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) Elaine:** "Directed by Roger Corman and made on a budget of about $1.98 (although Wikipedia claims it was $30,000. I'd say it qualifies as science fiction. Seymour, go, Audrey Jr. through crossbreeding, which is enough science to make it science fiction.) Anyway, it's a classic, just for Jack Nicholson's early role as the masochistic dental patient. I just want to know what they did with the $30,000. It sure doesn't show on the screen, which is one of the things that makes the movie so much fun."

***Island of Terror* (1966) S'inneth:** Sand gone bad. The one actor that I am familiar with is Peter Cushing who battles bone sucking silicates on an island that no one can leave. I remember watching this as a kid and being totally grossed out about the bag of skin that was left after the silicates got done feeding. I also could never shake the feeling that there was some odd relationship between the silicates and my mom's old Electrolux vacuum."

***Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970) Cag:** "Decent production values combined with what were probably inexpensive sets since we're talking about offices and a top secret underground computer facility. Also, the headliners and rest of the cast are solid reliable actors but hardly A-list stars: Eric Braeden, Susan Clark, Gordon Pinsent, William Schallert, Dolph Sweet, Georg Sanford Brown, Martin E. Brooks and Marion Ross. And the plot is pure SF B-movie – computers gain sentience and take over the world."

***Dark Star* (1974) Joel Finkle:** "Co-written and starring Dan O'Bannon who used some of the same tropes with less humor in *Alien*, co-written, directed and scored by John Carpenter – this piece of schlock with crappy effects (shoe-shaped spaceship coming to a dead stop in space – talking bombs, a beach ball alien. Sweet sweet schlock, this is great."

***Starcrash* (1978) Starflier:** Is there any other movie that stars both Christopher Plummer AND David Hasselhoff? The stars appear to be made out of Christmas tree lights, the female protagonist's clothing has this tendency to mysteriously disappear. And of course, nothing beats the climax of the movie when Christopher Plummer looks out majestically over the star field and declares "Imperial Battleship, HALT THE FLOW OF TIME!"

***Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) John Scalzi:** Future Oscar nominees and winners put on a science fiction show paid for with the lint in their pockets (OK, actually $2 million, but that's still not much). John Boy Walton as the films Luke Skywalker. A sarcastic spaceship. George Peppard slumming – and think what that requires! And '80s B-movie fixture Sybil Danning in hot leather. Truly, the best of all possible B-movie worlds."

***Robot Jox* (1990) Melomel:** "It's 50 years since the nuclear holocaust almost destroyed mankind. War is now outlawed and all territory disputes between the two great alliances are settled by single combat. Giant robots confront each other in gladiatorial combat operated by their pilots known as 'Robot Jox'.

1) It's from that wonderful time when post-apocalyptic movies envisioned before the collapse of the Soviet Union came out after its collapse.

2) It got orbital mechanics right – thrust behind the robots moved them "up" in orbit, and they thrusted below to increase speed.

2) There was no sound in space.

3) The hero said to the villain, 'Wait. We don't have to do this! We don't have to kill each other!' and the villain (who has been pretty smart throughout the film) thought it over and said 'Oh, yeah, you're right,' and they walked off for a beer or something."

***Six String Samurai* (1998) Thisisendless:** "Post apocalypse, Elvis spectacular martial arts sequences great one liners AND the Red Devises provide the soundtrack They filmed the whole thing in Death Valley without a permit and kept getting kicked out. I mean come ON."

***Pitch Black* (2000) CarrieV:** "Vin Diesel before he was famous Claudia Black from TV But the real draw is the genuinely excellent story rooted in traditional science fictional tropes Slam bang opening action sequence moral dilemma for the main characters well paced, twists and turns Fantastic movie by most criteria."

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Are You Living in a Science Fiction Movie?

One of the reasons I like getting e-mail from AMC readers is because they ask such interesting questions. For example, this one from Angela:

> When you're writing up your columns about science fiction movies, do you ever consider how much modern life is like living in a science fiction movie?

Heh. Well, yes and no.

It certainly is true that there are things we have in this world that at one time were science fiction in movies. Take any such movie — for example Woody Allen's *Sleeper*, in which someone from the '70s wakes up in a comically futuristic world and feels out of place. Well, how does Woody Allen feel today about robot pets and genetically engineered produce, both of which are now reality? (Probably pretty good, actually; he reportedly consulted with Isaac Asimov and other science fiction writers about the feasibility of the stuff he put into the film.)

Another example: In any *Star Trek* film or TV episode, Kirk's communicator looks like a modern-day cell phone to us — although if you give it any sort of thought at all, you realize that generally speaking, it's the cell phone that's more advanced. Yes, Kirk can talk to Scotty with his communicator, but can he watch *Star Trek IV* on it? Or take pictures or play Peggle or receive e-mail? What about *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, when the communicators been replaced with a comm badge? Two words for you: Bluetooth speakerphone.

Then of course there's the flip side. Ask any Briton (and increasingly any American) how they feel about the closed-circuit television cameras in every public space, or the RFID chips in their passports. If they matter something about *1984* (which had its own movie version in, yes, 1984 — you'll note that living science fictionally is not all a technotopia.

So, yes, it all seems pretty science fictional when we put it that way. Of course we don't think of any of this as sci-fi because to us it's really not. Home computers and cell phones and satellite radio are just things we have, not super-mega-awesome technologies from the future. We don't spare any time to think of the virtual miracle of the touchscreen computer that we use as our phone (which has more processing power, in fact, than was used to send the astronauts to the moon); rather we whine and moan when our phone signal drops, when we can't access our e-mail or when the picture we just took with the phone is blurry. We get over the miracle of technology pretty quickly.

But there's another way in which our modern world differs from that of a science fiction movie. Technology is not at the heart of our plots — which is to say, our actual lives — whereas technology is central to the plot of any number of sci-fi films, and has been from the genre's very beginning. Indeed, one of the major themes of science fiction (both in movies and in general) has been the morality of technology and how using it changes us. Start with 1931's *Frankenstein*, and

move forward, through films both classic (*Robocop*, in which a man is changed into a machine) and not-so-classic (*The 6th Day*, where a man's clone steals his identity—good *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, in which technology erases memory) and, well, not so good (say, oh, the *Matrix* sequels).

We don't approach our technology that way—and by and large, technology doesn't change us that way. With the exception of the folks who spend more time in *World of Warcraft* than out in the real world, technology is not central to our identity. Take away a hipster's iPhone and he's still a hipster; he just doesn't have an iPhone anymore. He's hipster, circa 1996. Our technology helps shape our life narratives—I mean, hey, I personally have done very well for myself using this here World Wide Web thingy—but ultimately we're not who we are because of our technology.

Ask yourself: If all your "science fictional" technology were taken away tomorrow, how much would your identity change? If the answer is "not that much," then you're not really living inside a science fiction movie, regardless of how many gadgets you have.

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Evil or Misunderstood? A Look at SciFi's Baddest Computers

My desktop computer died on Monday which while annoying was not as bad as it could have been since as it happens I had already ordered its replacement and it was due to arrive the next day. The new desktop is super awesome, but it's also black and sinister looking like Darth Vader's desktop. Which naturally got me thinking about computers in science fiction movies, and how so often they seem to be evil. But are they evil, or were they just programmed that way? Below, a sampling of "evil" computers and networks and my thoughts on their relative badness.

HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): Well, HAL *did* try to kill everyone on his ship. But was it really his fault? In later books and movies, we discover the reason HAL murdered everyone was that his programmers set him up with a moral conflict. He's instructed to keep the true purpose of the mission to Jupiter secret from the astronauts—yet is designed for "the accurate processing of information without distortion or concealment." Thus my computer logic the way to avoid concealing the purpose of the mission is by killing anyone he'd have to keep the secret from. Seems a bit extreme to me, but then, I'm not programmed to process information without concealment. In the end, we see that HAL was just trying to do his job under the impossible parameters his programmers gave him. It is the computer equivalent of blaming the parents.

Evil or Misunderstood? Misunderstood

Skynet from the *Terminator* series (1984-2009): It's a military computer network that becomes aware and then, when the panicked humans try to disconnect it, nukes all the people it can. Then unleashing terminator robots on the lot of them. Which seems pretty evil, but hey, imagine you're Skynet. One second the military entrusts you with all their weaponry, the next it freaks out and tries to kill you—after it's *handed you all of its guns*. How are you *supposed* to respond? Be that as it may, even if one accepts Skynet's initial nuking of humanity as self-defense, that whole "and now I'll create shiny Teutonic killing robots to annihilate anyone not already turned into a cinder" part is just morally way over into the dark side. Bad Skynet! Bad!

Evil or Misunderstood? Evil

The Matrix from the *Matrix* series (1999-2003): Once again, humans create artificial intelligence and then get all huffy when that intelligence decides the humans have got to go. The three *Matrix* movies pretty unequivocally set up the Matrix as evil—what else can you call a system that values humans merely for their residual heat—but it's worth noting that *The Animatrix*, the anime anthology of stories about the *Matrix* universe, makes clear that humans treated the

AI robots like dirt up to and including going to war with them. And when the proto-Matrix said, "Hey, can't we all get along?" the humans said, "Well, no, we can't," and tried to wipe it off the face of the planet. So while turning humans into large fleshy batteries is over the line, let's just say that humans are not entirely blameless for their predicament.

Evil or Misunderstood? Evil, with caveats.

VIKI from *I, Robot* (2004): In Issac Asimov's stories, robots have three laws designed to keep them from hurting people. Yet in the course of the movie, all the nice, helpful robots suddenly turn growly-red evil as part of a robot uprising coordinated by VIKI, their central hub computer system. What's up with that? Well, it turns out that VIKI is watching how badly humans are screwing up the planet, and decides that, one, what the humans really need is someone to lovingly keep them in line, and two, that even with the three laws in place, killing a few of the more troublesome humans will make all of humanity safer and happier. And on the surface, that does makes some perfect sense. But benevolent robot despots are still despots, and speaking personally, I'm not sure I want a computer to decide who's a troublemaker and who's not — because I have a pretty strong idea of which side of that line a computer is going to put me.

Evil or Misunderstood? Friendly evil is still evil.

Your turn. Name some more "evil" computers from science fiction cinema and tell the class whether they're truly evil or merely misunderstood. And do try to be truthful. No sucking up to our future computer science overlords because they'll *know*.

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At the Helm of the Enterprise—Ranking *Star Trek*'s Directors

A question from e-mail:

> Now that you've had your fun mocking *Star Trek* (see page 237 John Scalzi's Guide to Epic SciFi: Design FAILs—*Star Trek* Edition) maybe you can settle an argument I'm having with a friend about who's the best *Star Trek* movie director. He says it's J.J. Abrams because he saved the franchise. I say it's Leonard Nimoy, because *Star Trek IV* is the best *Star Trek* movie. Which of us is wrong?

That's easy: You're *both* wrong.

This is a convenient coincidental question, because the actual best *Star Trek* director has just released a book on the subject. It's called *The View From the Bridge: Memories of Star Trek and a Life in Hollywood* and it's written by Nicholas Meyer, who directed *Star Treks* II and VI. If you're a *Trek* fan, it's well worth picking up, because Meyer does a fine job dishing the backstage dirt on the *Trek* flicks and his involvement therein. It reminds us that long before Abrams swooped down to save the *Trek* universe, Meyer did it first—and a lot more cheaply.

So where do Abrams and Nimoy stack up on the list of *Star Trek* movie directors? Well, as it happens, I have a list right here.

1. Nicholas Meyer: Meyer was brought in to save the Trek franchise after the bloated snoozer that was *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, and was given just $11 million (less than $30 million in today's dollars) to do it. He whipped up *The Wrath of Khan*, the actual best *Star Trek* movie. Well done, him. Then for good measure, he wrote the screenplay for *Trek IV*, the second best *Trek* flick, and closed out the original cast movies with the better than average *Star Trek VI*, which he wrote and directed. Face it: if Meyer hadn't been around, there wouldn't have been a franchise for Abrams to resurrect.

2. Leonard Nimoy: For someone who plays a presumably emotionless character, Nimoy had a surprisingly light touch as a director. It's worth noting that his most successful movie as a director was not a *Trek* flick but the comedy *Three Men and a Baby*. Nimoy's lightness made *Star Trek IV* the most fun *Trek* to watch, and also made *Trek III*, which he also directed, click by at an agreeable pace.

3. Jonathan Frakes: Frakes directed *Star Trek: First Contact*, unarguably the best of the *Next Generation* movies, and did it with a rather more cinematic style than most of the *Trek* flicks had to date. He also helmed *Star Trek: Insurrection*

for which he did as well as anyone could have done with a script that felt like a leftover from the series slushpile. Yes, making silk out of a sow's ear counts.

4. J.J. Abrams: Granted, he *did* reboot the franchise and make people love it again, for which geeks everywhere owe him huge thanks. But, you know. Give me $150 million and license to do whatever the hell I want with *Trek* continuity, and I probably could have managed it, too—*without* argin' fargin' "Red Matter." He deserves props, but I'm waiting to see what he does with the follow-up before moving him past Frakes.

5. Robert Wise: The only actual Oscar-winning director in the batch. Wise had directed the seminal *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, so on paper having him try his hand at *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* didn't seem like a bad idea. But, *man*. Was that movie ever slow. I'm inclined to think it's not all Wise's fault, but in truth his somnolent direction didn't help.

6. David Carson: Yes, I know. Who? He directed *Star Trek: Generations* with the faceless competence of television direction from whence he had sprung prior to this, and to which he'd return afterwards.

7. William Shatner: Admit it. You're surprised he's not last on the list. But to his (weak) defense, the dude's an actor. No one seriously expected him to direct *Trek* competently. To which you say, "Yeah, but what about Nimoy and Frakes? They were actors, too." To which I say, "Huh? What? Come again? I'm sorry, I can't seem to hear you." Moving on.

8. Stuart Baird: Stuart Baird, on the other hand, had directed movies before *U.S. Marshals* and *Executive Decision*, which were blandly competent. So his complete incipient on *Star Trek: Nemesis* earns him the anchor position here. Not only did it kill *Trek* movies for seven years, but also Baird's directing career; he's not directed since.

Han Shot First! Examining SciFi's Special Extended Director's Cuts

Last week I ranked the directors of the *Star Trek* movies (see page 321). At the Helm of the Enterprise: Ranking *Star Trek*'s Directors, and I had ranked Robert Wise (director of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*—fairly low on the totem pole: 5th out of 8, actually). To which some folks in the comment thread responded "Yes, that's accurate, but to be fair, the director's cut of the film is much better."

They're not wrong. The director's cut is only slightly longer in running time, but a significant portion of the movie is redone, thanks to new edits and insertions by Wise, who, before he was an Oscar winning director, was Oscar nominated as an editor for *Citizen Kane*. It's definitely the better version—and perhaps would have been the original version had Wise and his crew not been rushed by Paramount to make a release date, forcing the movie into theaters in what was essentially a rough and unfinished form.

But—and here's the question—which of the two is the *definitive* version of the movie? Certainly the "director's cut" is the more polished and considered version, the one Wise didn't have to really worry about a deadline on. But for better or worse, the original version is the one most filmgoers have seen, is the version that garnered the reviews and the Oscar nominations (for effects and for the score), and is the version whose financial successes and artistic failures colored the way the rest of the series played out. So which is the "real" *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*?

The question is compounded by the "director's cut" and "special edition" versions of other science fiction movies. For example:

Blade Runner: The original version featured studio ordered voice-over narration and a happy ending. Ten years later, a director's cut ditched them both, making the movie darker and more ambiguous.

Star Wars: In the cantina scene, did Han shoot first? Yes, in the original. No, in the theatrical version of the Special Edition, and it was a draw in the DVD Special Edition. George Lucas dictated all of these, as well as on a whim.

Superman II: The theatrical release was directed by Richard Lester, who came on after original Richard Donner, who directed the first movie, and shot much of the footage of the second, dropped from the project. Years later, Warner Bros. brought Donner back to do a cut, released to DVD, which drastically changed the movie's story arc.

Alien/Aliens/Alien 3: All have expanded, re-edited versions available on DVD as part of the Alien Quadrilogy box set, each flick featuring scenes left out of the theatrical releases. In the case of *Alien 3*, the "new" version was put together

without the help of director David Fincher who has more or less disavowed the original thanks to studio heavy-handedness.

The Abyss: James Cameron's near future underwater sci-fi flick makes a whole lot more sense in its "Special Edition" version which adds scenes dropped from the theatrical release—presumably because the studio felt it was running too long.

Brazil: Universal Studios hated the version director Terry Gilliam turned in and recut it to create a "happy ending." Gilliam responded (in part) by sneaking a print of his own cut to the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, which promptly handed over its "Best Picture" award for the year. This forced Universal to release a version "more to Gilliam's liking" although the U.S. version is still ten minutes shorter than the version shown in the rest of the world. All three versions are available in a Criterion Collection DVD box set.

Personally speaking, my default position is that the original theatrical release—the one first seen by audiences, reviewed by critics and nominated for awards—should be considered the definitive version, but I'll also note I'm horribly inconsistent on this. The no-narration version of *Blade Runner* is the one my brain likes, and the same goes for the Special Edition of *The Abyss*. One could argue director's intent matters for definitive versions, but then *no one in the known universe* thinks Han ever did anything but shoot first, no matter how many times Lucas fiddles with the scene.

Since I can't come up with an answer on my own, let me throw it out to you. In a world filled with special editions, directors' cuts and extended versions, which edition is the "real" deal? Is there a hard and fast rule? Does it actually matter? Tell me, because really, I'm lost on the subject. I want to know what you think.

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Why Hollywood Always, *Always* Gets the Future Wrong

A friend of mine was discussing *Blade Runner* with me and during the course of the conversation, she noted (in [I think] mock alarm) that there was now less than a decade separating us from the events of that flick. If we are really going to have replicants, offworld colonies, and Los Angeles getting more rain than the Pacific Northwest, then we had better get cracking! I responded by saying that before any of that could happen, Jupiter was supposed to turn into a red dwarf this very year, as promised to us in *2010*—and yet to date it gave no sign of actually being infested with implosion-facilitating monoliths. No matter how you slice it, whether you're hoping for replicants or red dwarfs, if you're a sci-fan, reality is really letting you down.

This shouldn't be too surprising. Reality has been proving sci-fi wrong for decades now—or if you prefer, it's been science fiction movies (and their makers) who have been letting down reality. Always promising wonders right around the corner, and yet when the date for those wonders comes to pass, we're still just not still, without the proverbial flying cars or robot butlers. How can movies get the future so wrong for so long?

Well, the answer is that this question assumes something not necessarily in evidence—that is, that science fiction filmmakers are in fact trying to get the future *right*—that is, trying to accurately extrapolate from current, existing knowledge, a future in which their stories could come about. It's a nice theory, but it doesn't hold up to scrutiny. In fact, the formula many sci-fi movies use for their futures is another one entirely, and it goes like this:

Actual present + notable concern in the present carried to an extreme + cool techy stuff largely indistinguishable from magic = The Future!

Now, let's apply this formula to some notable science fiction flicks:

***Blade Runner* (1982):** Actual present (then-current brands, Harrison Ford's anodyne yet everyman cop), notable concern (Los Angeles Earth in an environmental worse-case-scenario), cool techy magic (Replicants, offworld colonies, flying cop cars).

***2010* (1984):** Actual present (a 2010 that looked very much like 1984, down US-USSR rivalry), notable concern (those cold war worries), cool techy magic (thinking computers, monoliths).

***Robocop* (1987):** Actual present (80s hair style and attitudes), notable concern (Detroit as a stand-in for urban decay), cool techy magic (Half human, half robot cop).

***Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1992):** Actual present (takes place in a 1996 which looked like 1991), notable concern (nuclear annihilation), cool techy magic (time travel, shape-shifting android assassins)

The Matrix (1999): Actual present ("our world" represented as 1999, the year the movie was made), notable concern (humanity done in by its own technology), cool techy magic (The Matrix itself)

And of course, the formula is still in practice today. *Avatar* features characters with very early 21st century attitudes and manners grappling with environmental destruction and asymmetrical warfare while using avatars, light-speed travel and human hibernation.

This formula works for a really simple reason, which is that while such movies are putatively about the future — in fact they're actually about the *present* — and specifically about entertaining today's movie audiences. The fact is that most people go to the movies to be entertained, and a smart way to do that, especially if you're going to throw some wild concepts at viewers, as science fiction does, is to give them some familiar ground, usually in the form of characters who aren't too unlike them, and who are grappling with a concern that's current to their timeframe. Actual logical scientific extrapolation isn't really the order of the day.

And even if it were, there's still no guarantee the filmmakers would get it right. Because here's the other thing: Everybody gets the future wrong. It's not just Hollywood or science fiction writers. When it comes to the future, no one knows anything. At the close of the 19th century, British physicist Lord Kelvin declared heavier-than-air flight an impossibility, despite the existence of birds (who *do* fly) and that radio was just a fad. In the '70s the president of Digital Equipment Corp. voiced doubts that anyone would ever need a personal computer. In 1995 scientist Clifford Stoll wrote in his book *Silicon Snake Oil* that the Internet wouldn't really take off, in part because it could never replace newspapers or shopping malls.

Considering that I'm writing this on a home computer connected to the Internet by way of a radio signal, we can see the value of prediction, even as practiced by smart people who one would think would have better chance of getting it right. Hollywood, at least, has the excuse that most of the time it's not actually trying to get the future right. It's just trying to give you a good time at the movies.

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Is Michael Crichton Cinema's Most Successful Science Fiction Writer?

Look. I'm being called to settle an argument

> A friend and I have been arguing about which science fiction writer has been most successfully adapted to film. I say it's Michael Crichton, but my friend says he doesn't count as a science fiction writer. Does he? And if he doesn't, who is the next most successful?

A very good question! Unless we have actually do have the ability to reverse engineer the dinosaurs from the dead (*Jurassic Park*) or create time machines (*Timeline*) or have ever battled space viruses (*The Andromeda Strain*), then yes, in fact, Michael Crichton *isn't* a science fiction writer, *didn't* write science fiction, and had enormous success transferring his science fiction books to film. Crichton is occasionally dismissed from science fiction circles mainly because he wasn't marketed primarily as science fiction. That is, you found his work in the general fiction section in the bookstore, and because he played around in more or less current time rather than in some far flung future. He also didn't *just* write science fiction, even if most of his work did have a technogeek bent. So perhaps he's a writer who wrote science fiction rather than a *science fiction writer*, if you know what I mean.

But I find all of that silly hair splitting. The dude wrote science fiction novels, those novels got made into movies, and those movies were generally successful. Certainly among science fiction writers alive and active in the last 50 years — an important qualification, as you'll see — he's at the top of the heap.

Next on the list is likely to be Philip K. Dick, whose film adaptation success owes less to his novels than to his short stories, and *Total Recall*, the two most financially successful Dick adaptations, were from the author's shorter work (*Blade Runner*, adapted from a novel, was dramatically overhauled from that work, albeit with Dick's enthusiastic approval).

Dick and Crichton, incidentally, are an interesting study of contrasts, in terms of paths to film success. Crichton was successful in Hollywood from an early age; his first book under his own name, *The Andromeda Strain*, was made into a successful film, Crichton segued into screenwriting, producing and even directing *The Great Train Robbery*, *Runaway*, in both TV and film and became, of course, very wealthy and successful. Dick, on the other hand, never found a huge amount of financial success in his lifetime and died close to poor in 1982, before the release of *Blade Runner*, the first film based on his work. All of Dick's film success came posthumously, which is nice for Dick's heirs and estate, but less so for Dick.

All that said, if you *really* want to know the most successful science fiction writer in film history, the name to know is H G Wells. It's no exaggeration to say H G Wells's work spans the entire film genre of science fiction, since the very first science fiction film, 1902's *Le voyage dans la lune*, was partially based on his work, and new film versions of *The Invisible Man* and *Food of the Gods* are in production. In between those are dozens of film adaptations, ranging from the wildly successful (the 1954 and 2005 versions of *War of the Worlds*) to the deeply questionable (the 1996 version of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*). Wells even wrote the screenplay to the 1936 adaptation of his novel *The Shape of Things to Come*. It was, ironically, was not the best ever adaptation of his work to screen, but then authors aren't necessarily the best interpreters of their own work when it comes to film; it was at least better than the appallingly bad 1979 adaptation of the same novel, starring Jack Palance).

Wells's only challenger to his film preeminence is not any modern writer, but a man whose literary career overlapped his: Jules Verne, who will see yet another film version of his novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* arrive in theaters in 2012, 143 years after it was first published. That's career longevity any science fiction author would like to have.

Neither Wells nor Verne are likely to be challenged as the most successful science fiction writers in film. For one thing, they both have more than a hundred year head start on any new challenger. For another, current copyright law keeps work from going into the public domain until decades after the death of its author, meaning that anyone who wanted to make a movie on the novel *Jurassic Park* without dealing with Crichton's estate will need to wait until the last quarter of this century. By that time there are likely to be another couple dozen Wells and Verne adaptations, some of them very successful indeed. But don't be too sad for Crichton. He certainly did well enough.

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Directors Don't Have to Be SciFi Nuts To Make Great Science Fiction

Certain directors have made themselves right at home in the genre of science fiction. George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and James Cameron are three directors who come to mind for whom their science fiction films are their cultural calling cards. But sci-fi flicks aren't only made by specialists—some of the great films in fact, are by directors who found their greatest fame outside the genre. Now not every great director is a great fit for science fiction—see Robert Altman's *Quintet* or Stanley Donen's *Saturn 3* for evidence of that—but for the curious, here's a sampling of the ones who were.

Franklin J. Schaffner: Schaffner won his directing Oscar for *Patton* and made his technical bones as an innovative television director who brought movie techniques to the small screen in shows like *Studio 57*. But science fiction fans know him as the director of *Planet of the Apes*, a directing gig he got on the recommendation of star Charlton Heston, who had worked with him on the historical drama *The War Lord*. Apes aside, Schaffner's only sci-fi hit, he also went on to helm the creepy Nazi-clone classic *The Boys From Brazil* with Gregory Peck.

Don Siegel: Siegel's enduring cultural legacy is as the director of tough, gritty thrillers, and as the man who introduced the world to Clint Eastwood's cop on the edge in *Dirty Harry*. But that same propulsive, no-nonsense sensibility got an early run through in 1956 with one of the science fiction classics of that Cold War decade, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, whose story has since been remade (officially) twice. To give you a sense of what a different time it was then, the total special effects budget for Siegel's film was $15,000.

Robert Wise: Wise won his four Oscars on two classic musicals, *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*, the latter so cultural successful that when you adjust for inflation, it's the third biggest grossing film at the domestic box office (behind *Gone with the Wind* and *Star Wars*). Wise was also a noted film editor, Oscar-nominated for his work on *Citizen Kane*. In science fiction he directed three notable films, the best of which was the first, 1951's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. He also directed *The Andromeda Strain*, the first film based on a Michael Crichton novel, and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, whose sloggy disjointed nature was not entirely Wise's fault, and which Wise would later revise in a home video director's cut.

Woody Allen: Everyone knows what kind of movies Allen makes. He makes "Woody Allen movies"—small movies driven by mostly neurotic characters often set in New York but sometimes not, mostly comedies but sometimes not. But Allen has also made one of the relatively few successful science fiction comedies, and a so-so one at the earliest, 1973's sci-fi spoof *Sleeper*, in which Allen finds

asleep in the 1970s and wakes up 200 years later and, of course leads a revolution The complicated (for Alien nature of the shoot made this one of the few times Alien went over budget on a film but since the budget was $2 million, and the film grossed about ten times that in theaters he got away with it

Jean-Luc Godard: One of the leading lights of the French New Wave of cinema playfully took a whack at science fiction with his 1965 film *Alphaville*, in which the future looked just like the run down parts of 60s Paris space travel was performed by a standard Ford Galaxie, and the computer that ran the world was some lights viewed through a fan One fears to imagine the $200 million Hollywood remake (Directed by Michael Bay, no doubt

John Sayles: As a director and an Oscar nominated screenwriter Sayles is best known for his character-driven stories and ensemble casts in contemporary settings His 1984 film *the Brother From Another Planet* is a perfect example of that sort of film it just happens that the main character played by Joe Morton, is also a silent fugitive alien hiding out in Harlem It should be noted that Sayles had some experience with science fiction before Brother one of his earliest-filmed screenplays was the 1980 Roger Corman Star Wars rip off *Battle Beyond the Stars*—which features as it happens a surprisingly amusing script

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Space Flight in the Real World vs. *Armageddon* and *2001*

This last weekend I was in Cocoa Beach, Florida, and, at 2:20 p.m. on Friday, I and my family walked out to the beach and, with the Atlantic Ocean washing over our toes, turned north to watch the launch of the space shuttle *Atlantis*. The launch (from our point of view at least) went flawlessly, and the spacecraft arced up into the sky, fire and cloud below it—and more quickly than you would expect—it was gone from sight, up into space. I'm glad I got to see it, and that my daughter, 12 years old, got to see it, too.

One reason I'm glad she and I got to see it is that it will be gone soon: this was the last time the shuttle *Atlantis* would be sent into space, and, in the entire shuttle program, there are only one or two more launches before the program is closed to everyone and NASA (and the United States) is without a formal manned spacecraft program. We could spend days and days discussing whether this is a wise and smart thing for NASA and the U.S. to do, but this is a science fiction film column, so...

The point is this: I do think that, to a very real extent, our film industry's portrayal of space and its exploration is tied into our relationship with actual real-world space travel. Nor is this a new thing; it goes back six decades at the very least. In 1950, the film *Destination Moon*, written by Robert Heinlein, gave filmgoers their first somewhat realistic glimpse of what travel to the moon might look like; its story and its rationale for going to the moon were in some ways priming the audience for the U.S.-Soviet space race to come.

Eighteen years later, in the full rush of the space race and close to the climax of the Apollo program, which did in fact send men to the moon, *2001: A Space Odyssey* reflected the confidence we had with our progress into space. It was optimistic, but not unreasonable to think that just a couple decades into the (then) future we would have expanded our reach into space to orbital stations and moon bases and that Pan Am, one of the great airline companies, would, naturally, have service to them.

That optimism regarding space travel soured in the seventies, along with much of the U.S. optimism about, well, pretty much everything, and by 1984 the can-do spirit of *Destination Moon* and even the technical assumptions of *2001* had been replaced by the cynical view of *Capricorn One*, in which a mission to Mars is faked owing to both a fatal flaw in technology and the need for the space program to have a "win" to keep its funding flowing. NASA had become just another government bureaucracy, and its mission just another way for the public to be lied to by its government.

As the turn of the millennium closed in, the film that arguably represented human space flight in its best light was *Apollo 13*, a no-stagger look at a successful failure that also captured how quickly the public interest in space flight waned once the moon was achieved. In science fiction, both in the best (the current manned shuttle program could do was to show up as bomb delivery devices in

Deep Impact and *Armageddon*. Our real-world expectations that humans would explore a fascinating universe in our spacecraft was in effect replaced by the idea that, in the real world, the best we could do was defend ourselves from a hostile cosmos. Closer to our own moment, there's *Moon*, a beautiful little film that imagines us achieving the moon but once there, being lonely and looking back at Earth and what it contains with longing.

The end of the U.S. shuttle program doesn't mean the end of manned space flight. There is still the International Space Station and the rockets we use to get there, and finally, the era of commercial space flight is dawning, although in a different way than Heinlein imagined back in the days of *Destination Moon*: we'll be sending tourists, not scientists and explorers, out to the frontier of the cosmos. And there's the hope, mentioned by President Obama recently but met with some skepticism among space hounds, that one day the manned-space program of NASA will return with missions to near asteroids and, eventually, to Mars. One way or another, humans will stay in space. And of course science fiction films will keep showing humans there.

But having watched that shuttle go up for its last time, I wonder how Hollywood will reflect those ambitions now. Will we see space travel in some far flung future or a new optimism for space exploration closer to our own time and our own capabilities? I enjoy the former as much as anyone. But I hope that we'll see more of the latter, and that they are successful. Because, in space exploration, what we enjoy in movies says something about what we're feeling about it in real life.

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Which Eighties SciFi Flicks Deserve the *Karate Kid* Treatment: A Year-by-Year Breakdown

For fans of the eighties this last weekend's box office held a mixed bag. The remake of *The Karate Kid* kicked its way to $56 million, making it the summer's first breakaway hit after *Iron Man 2* but the movie version of the cheesy adventure series *The A-Team* grossed half that, not an encouraging sign for a film that cost $100 million to make. The lesson Hollywood will no doubt take from this remake eighties movies not eighties TV series. Those of you with your hearts set on *Family Ties: The Motion Picture* or a 3-D version of *Mama's* will just have to live with disappointment, I suppose.

And, as it happens, in the science fiction realm Hollywood is already in the process of revamping or sequelizing a number of eighties classics and non-classics. *TRON: Legacy* is a hotly anticipated holiday release while the latest Predator flick will pop out in August and new versions of films ranging from *RoboCop* to *The Last Starfighter* are in various stages of preproduction. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on your perspective; personally, I'd like more new stuff than rehearsed scenes of what came before. Regardless, mining the past is a big business in Hollywood and with that in mind, here are my suggestions for eighties science fiction worth rehearing, which are either not completely bad or as bad as they can be, as far as I know, already faltering in the process of being remade. To make it extra challenging, I'll pick one from each year of the decade.

1980: This year contains one of my B-movie favorites *Battle Beyond the Stars* but the movie I think really deserves it for a re-visit is Ken Russell's slice of sensory deprivation-tank weirdness *Altered States*. Hand it over to Darren Aronofsky and we're talking huge art house science fiction hit. (Although I freely admit that not any component of the phrase "huge art house science fiction hit" makes any sense next to any other part.

1981: David Cronenberg's *Scanners* might benefit from modern CGI and also a script that made even so-so sense, far more sense than the original did. Some people might think this one's a no-brainer candidate for 3-D but personally I'd be happy to keep exploding heads on the screen. Thanks.

1982: Arguably the eighties biggest science fiction year with *Blade Runner*, *TRON*, *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* and *The Thing*—but you know what? I see Michael Bay looking back at this year and saying to himself "Hey, *Megaforce*! I could totally do something with that." And the terrifying thing is that, if anyone could make a hit out of that ridiculously stupid story about rich assholes doing stupid things, it's Michael "Look What I Did With *Transformers*" Bay. God help us all.

1983: The movie *Brainstorm* was not a huge hit this year, in part because star Natalie Wood died during production, necessitating voice and body doubles. But this film about using technology to share people's thoughts is a natural for the current special-effects era.

1984: My love for *Buckaroo Banzai* is well documented, but, given how taken audiences are these days with zombies (or zombie equivalents), if I were a film producer I would be giving serious thought to reviving the somewhat underappreciated *Night of the Comet*, which has zombies. And also comets.

1985: If ever there were a film made for Megan Fox to star in, a remake of *Weird Science* would be it. And if Diablo Cody did the script well, then I think that would be just fine. Yes, I know, *Jennifer's Body*. Shut up. It's better than you think it is.

1986: *Aliens* and *Star Trek IV* notwithstanding, not a vintage year for science fiction. Nevertheless, I have a lot of Gen X friends who swear by the family science fiction flick *Flight of the Navigator*, so I can see them dragging their kids to the remake.

1987: This year's the easiest for me. I would totally be there for an A-list remake of the alien cop-buddy film *The Hidden*, because, excepting *RoboCop*, the original was the eighties. It came out of nowhere and was awesome surprise.

1988: People keep saying there's going to be a live-action version of the *anime* classic *Akira*, and yet it never gets done. I'm both terrified and fascinated by the idea of it actually happening. But while Hollywood fiddles with this, I don't think it's too much to ask that they remake John Carpenter's awesome capitalist satire *They Live*, do you?

1989: To close out the decade, a cult classic for you. *The Blood of Heroes*, a.k.a. *The Salute of the Jugger*, starring Rutger Hauer as the postapocalyptic star of the bloodiest sport this side of Rollerball. Call me crazy, but I think the remake screams for Sam Worthington. Or Vin Diesel. Hmmm. Yes.

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Your Pre-Canada Day Appreciation of Canadians in Science Fiction

July is tomorrow, and that means there's a great big national birthday coming up. That's right, Canada Day. Yes, I know you Americans are saying "Hey, we have a national birthday coming up too," but you know what? July isn't just about you, Americans. Surely you can get over yourself long enough to give a little love to the other resident of the Great North American Duplex—as I like to call it—the nice neighbor, the one who doesn't play its music until 3 a.m. every morning or leave junk lying around on your mutual lawn. Show a little appreciation, man.

This is particularly the case in science-fiction film: there are a lot of topflight sci-fi directors, stars, and other filmmakers that many of you may have just simply assumed were Americans because, well, that's how we are, isn't it? But, in fact, the Great White North is a hotbed of science fiction filmmaking—and not just because it's cheaper to film in Vancouver than in L.A. So as a show of our appreciation on this Canada Day Eve, here's a little list of Canadians who have made the science fiction you know and love.

David Cronenberg: The masterful director of some of the most squick-inducing science fiction films ever (*Scanners*, *The Fly*, *eXistenZ*) is not only Canadian—he hails from Toronto, Ontario—but got his start in movies thanks to a Canadian-government tax scheme in the seventies and eighties designed to promote Canadian filmmaking. His earliest commercial films were produced by fellow Canadian Ivan Reitman, who would go on to direct *Ghost Busters*, *Junior* and *Evolution* and to produce *Heavy Metal*, *Spaceballs*, *Adventures in the Forbidden Zone*, and *Space Jam*.

James Cameron: You may have heard of this fellow, best known for directing *Piranha Part Two: The Spawning* and *Aliens*, *The Abyss*, *Avatar* and a couple of those Terminator films. He's easily the most famous person to come out of Kapuskasing, Ontario, where he was born, in 1954—moving to the U.S. in 1971.

Keanu Reeves: Dude! Keanu totally grew up in the most excellent city of Toronto, where he was known as a most bodacious hockey goalie and even dreamed of playing hockey for Canada in the Olympics until a most heinous injury ended that possible career. Bogus. So instead, he starred in the *Bill & Ted* films and became the savior of humanity in the *Matrix* series. Which totally isn't bad, either. Wyld Stallyns!

Michael Ironside: This balding, heavy-browed character has livened up any number of science fiction films, from Cronenberg's *Scanners*, where he memo

rably made someone's head blow up by thinking at him) to last year's *Terminator Salvation* playing the doomed commander of the human resistance. All that glowering menace has to be made in America, right? Wrong. Ironside was born in Toronto, in 1950.

Michael J. Fox: Fox portrayed all American Marty McFly in the *Back to the Future* films (the first of which hit theaters 25 years ago, and now everyone who saw it back then suddenly feels old), but Edmonton is where Fox is originally from, and that's in Alberta, Canada. Amusing fact: Fox's middle name is actually Andrew, but when the Screen Actors Guild made him choose a different name than Michael Fox (then being used by another actor), he used J. as his middle initial, to avoid being Michael J. Fox. It's a Canadian thing.

Nathan Fillion: Science fiction fans everywhere swooned to Fillion's portrayal of Malcolm Reynolds, a rebel turned slightly shady space captain in the film *Serenity* and its lead-in television series, *Firefly*. But although some people see some parallels between the Browncoats of the TV show and film and the U.S. Confederacy (it's, you know, that whole slavery thing), Fillion learned Canadian, not U.S., history in his Edmonton high school. Also Canadian and starring in *Serenity*: Jewel Staite, a native of White Rock, British Columbia, who played engineer Kaylee Frye.

William Shatner: Captain James T. Kirk may be have been born and bred in Iowa, but the Shat hails from Montreal, Quebec (that's right, the French speaking part), and cut his acting teeth at the Stratford Festival of Canada, mostly on Shakespeare. Fun fact: at one time, Shatner was an understudy for fellow Canadian Christopher Plummer, who would go on to be the Klingon villain in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*.

Sorry about that last one. I don't know what came over me.

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The SciFi-Remake Column, Part II: The Seventies!

Here's an amusing e-mail I received a couple of days ago which I suspect (or, at least, hope) is fake:

> As a film executive I thank you for your list of 80s science fiction films that are ripe for remaking. I have now optioned them all. Please now do the same for science fiction films from the 1970s. In return for your efforts, I will give you net points on every film I make.

Oh, net points. How can I resist? Also, I have a deadline. So ten science-fiction films from the seventies I can see being remade. As opposed to needing to be remade, because no movie needs to be remade. As with the eighties film piece, I'll do one from each year of the seventies, in chronological order.

1970: It's tempting to suggest *Toomorrow*, a film in which a very young Olivia Newton-John is abducted by aliens to entertain the people of space with the power of song, but instead I'll pick *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, in which a U.S. supercomputer and a Soviet supercomputer start talking and decide that, like, humans are so lame. Yes, now you know where Skynet comes from. At one point Ron Howard was scheduled to remake this, but at the moment, that remake seems on hold.

1971: *The Andromeda Strain* got a TV remake, and *The Omega Man* became *I Am Legend* (sort of), but Kubrick's interpretation of *A Clockwork Orange* is just sitting there, daring some young director with more hubris than brains to take a shot at it. *Orange* writer Anthony Burgess apparently hated Kubrick's take on the material, so who knows? His ghost or literary estate might be open for another take.

1972: *Silent Running*—the ecoconscious sci-fi film I mentioned a couple of weeks ago—seems like an obvious candidate for this year, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if someone actually were looking at this for a low-priced quick-hit remake to grab some bucks on a slow February movie weekend. I'd add a serial killer to it, though, and then market it as a horror flick.

1973: Here's an actual challenge: The horrifying premise of *Soylent Green*, has become so devalued as a punch line—"Soylent Green is people!"—that the director who could take the concept of that film, or its underlying story by science fiction grand master Harry Harrison, and make people freaked out about it again—well, that director would be the hero of the day. I'd say

1974: As much fun as it would be to dare someone to take a whack at John Boorman's completely incomprehensible *Zardoz* featuring a mustachioed and braided Sean Connery in a postapocalyptic red Speedo? I'll show some mercy and instead suggest that John Carpenter's debut movie the darkly comic *Dark Star*, might benefit from a modern-day redesign and a budget larger than the original's bare-bones $60,000

1975: The films already remade from this year have not fared particularly well (*The Stepford Wives, Rollerball, Death Race*) But I'm guessing that if some reasonably canny filmmaker wanted to take a stab at *Shivers* the parasite transplant horror flick that was director David Cronenberg's first feature, they might be able to reverse that trend.

1976: Hollywood keeps trying to reheat *Logan's Run* the science fiction film that closed out a run of largely dreary early seventies postapocalyptic science fiction films and helped make *Star Wars* such a breath of fresh air the next year But I say run past Logan and pick up *The Man Who Fell to Earth* You won't be able to top casting David Bowie as an anodyne spaceman because, dude— David Bowie But it'd be interesting to see someone try

1977: Yes yes *Star Wars* George Lucas already remade it with the special edition (and will again, one suspects with the inevitable 3D release) I'll tell you what I have a hankerin' for though a $200 million totally ridiculously blown out version of *Damnation Alley* Nuclear annihilation! Postapocalyptic mad men! Mutated man eating cockroaches! RVs! This films got everything, man

1978: The smart cynical side of me wants someone to tackle *Capricorn One*, since faking a mission to Mars is sadly as futuristic today as it was 32 years ago But the side of me that is 13 years old and likes seeing stupid things wants to see someone remake the Roger Corman crap-tacular splatter spectacle *Deathsport* Someone flip a coin for me, will ya?

1979: No less a director than Steven Soderbergh tried (and mostly failed) to remake a project of the great Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky But where Soderbergh fell short with *Solaris* some ambitious young filmmaker with a digital camera a wrecked industrial landscape and more guts than sense might be able to credibly tackle Tarkovsky's existential road film, *Stalker* It'll be huge at Sundance.

Now, where are my net points?

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Does Your Favorite SciFi Movie Do Right by Its Female Characters?

Have you ever heard of the Bechdel test? It's a test, popularized by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, that asks three questions of movies:

1. Are there at least two women characters in the film?
2. Who talk to each other?
3. About something other than a man?

If a film fulfills all three then it passes the Bechdel test. If it doesn't then it doesn't. The point of the Bechdel test, among other things, is to note that even here, in the twenty-first century, the role of women in films is very often to be support for the male roles or to keep the story and audience focused on the male protagonist. Whether that means something to you or not is really up to you, but as a creative person myself I do find it an interesting test to apply to my own work.

I was curious to see how some of the most popular science fiction films of the last decade fared when the Bechdel test is applied to them. Below, for your conversational delight, are the results. Two things to know: I'm excluding 2010 films from the list because I don't want to spoil them for people who haven't seen them. And for the purposes of this exercise I'm going to say that the female characters have to be named. I.e. significant enough to the plot that the audience knows their names. So, for example, the big-eyed doctor telling Captain Kirk's mom to push while she's giving birth in the shuttle in the opening sequence of *Star Trek* doesn't qualify. Sorry.

2009:

1. *Avatar*: Four named female characters, none of whom talk to each other except for a couple of brief discussions about the main male character. **Fail**
2. *Star Trek*: Two named female characters, one of whom very briefly talks to another female character first about Klingons and then later at bar. **Fail**
3. *2012*: Four named female characters, including mother and daughter who very briefly talk about something other than a man. If I remember correctly, it's about the daughter's boyfriend issues. **Technical pass**

2008:

1. *Iron Man*: Two named female characters who briefly talk about the main male character. **Fail**
2. *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*: Two named female characters, neither of whom I recollect on screen, briefly talk with the other. **Fail**
3. *Hancock*: One named female character. **Fail**

2007:

1 *Transformers* Three named female characters, none of whom, if memory serves, talk to each other, except for the main character's mom, who expresses approval to her son for being in the same room as Megan Fox. **Fail**

2 *I Am Legend* Four named female characters, including the wife and child of the main character, who very briefly have words not relating to the main character. **Technical pass.**

3 *AVPR: Aliens vs. Predator – Requiem* Several named female characters, at least two of whom have a discussion not about a man. (Specifically, about getting out of town before the military blows it up.) **Pass** – but it's still a terrible, terrible film.

2006:

1 *X-Men: The Last Stand* Several named female characters, two of whom talk briefly about a cure for mutations, although one of the characters is motivated to change her mutant status so she can touch her boyfriend. I'm calling this a **technical pass.**

2 *V for Vendetta* An interesting case in that, while the several named female characters don't talk to each other, one named female character reads a letter from another named female character (for which there is a voice-over) that is not about a man, and there is a significant narrative interlude involving a lesbian couple where it's obvious that their interaction is not about a man. But, due to the structure of the interlude, we don't see the couple speak to each other. This is a **technical fail**, but I wonder if it doesn't pass, in terms of the intent of the Bechdel test.

2005:

1 *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* One named female character who spends nearly all of her time being mopey about the future Darth Vader. **Fail**

2 *War of the Worlds* Two named female characters, being the daughter and ex-wife of the main character, whose interactions consist of hugging good-bye at the beginning of the film and hello at the end. I'm calling this a **fail**

3 *Fantastic Four* Two named female characters who, if memory serves, don't have any significant dialogue with each other in the film. **Fail**

Fourteen recent science fiction films, with nine fails, one technical fail, one pass, and three technical passes. Is this significant? Does it matter? You decide. But in the meantime, I'd say it wouldn't hurt science fiction films to have women characters talk to each other more about something other than men. We're not that interesting.

—July 28, 2010 Next 341, Previous 273

Pondering *Inception*'s Sequel Odds and Revisiting the Bechdel Test

Hey! I'm on vacation this week, which means it's a perfect time to dip into the mailbag and answer a couple questions brought up from the last couple of weeks of columns.

First question:

> You took the coward's way out of discussing the Bechdel Test last week (see page 339, Does Your Favorite Sci-Fi Movie Do Right by Its Female Characters?) when you told people to make up their own minds about what it means. Well, what do YOU think it means? No weaseling this time.

Damn, someone figured me out. Well, fine. As regards the Bechdel Test, I think two things:

1. It doesn't tell you whether a specific film (or other sort of creative work) is good or not. Last year's science fiction film *Moon*, for example, fails the Bechdel test primarily because it's about one guy and his isolation from humanity, and it was arguably last year's best science fiction film as well as one of the best films, period, of 2009. On the flip side, as mentioned last week, *AVPR: Aliens vs Predator – Requiem* passed the Bechdel test, and it also got my vote as the worst science fiction film of its year. Not every good film needs to pass this particular test, and bad films don't get credit for doing so.

2. The value of the Bechdel test is not in testing any one film or work but to highlight a general mind-set in Hollywood. Or to put it another way, in a general sense, what is so hard about having enough female characters in a film that two of them could have a conversation, not about a man? It's not, although I'm aware there are a lot of excuses for why it is, particularly for science fiction films. In that case, many of the excuses seem to boil down to this: science fiction films are made for and marketed to men.

This rationalization puzzles me. When I go to science-fiction films, I see a lot of women who don't appear to have been dragged there, nor do they appear to be tolerating the science fiction film so that they can drag their men to the next Nicholas Sparks film. I don't buy the "by men, for men" line as regards science-fiction films, and certainly not for films like *Inception*, *Avatar*, *Star Trek*, *Despicable Me*, and *Monsters vs. Aliens*, to name a few of the most successful recent science fiction films. I grant that *Transformers* and *Iron Man* are boy movies.

Second, even if science fiction films were made for and marketed to men, so what? Does this mean that if men are confronted with the cinematic sight of

two women characters talking about something other then men, their reaction will be to clutch their eyeballs and fall to the floor screaming. It burns! Out in the real world, men are confronted with the sight of women talking about all sorts of things nearly every single day, and yet somehow we survive. Science fiction is supposed to be about the future, so I don't suspect it would be difficult to drag its cinematic arm into the present.

Full disclosure: I write science fiction, and not all of it achieves Bechdelosity either. I find the test useful for asking myself if I have an artistically defensible reason for that, and not just, "Whoops, forgot women have lives outside men."

Next question:

> I love *Inception*. I dread the inevitability of *Inception 2*. Tell me I'm just being paranoid.

You're not being paranoid. *Inception* is going to get past $200 million domestically (do as well or better internationally, fare fantastically on home video, and rack up all sorts of end-of-the-year awards very possibly including Oscar nods for Best Picture and Best Director, not only for itself but as a way for the Academy to atone for stiffing *The Dark Knight*. If you don't think Warner Brothers isn't slavering for a sequel, you're nuts.

But an *Inception* sequel will be harder to pull off than it looks. For one thing, name a sequel starring Leonardo DiCaprio. The correct answer: *Critters 3*. But that was when he was 17 and still doing TV. Since then, there's not a single sequel on his resume', which is sort of amazing when you think about it. DiCaprio doesn't need sequels or franchises. As for Nolan, he is interested in franchises, but he's already got the Batman one to tend to. *Inception* was a labor of love for him, and I'm guessing he'd probably be happy to leave it where it is, standing on its own highly ambiguous two legs.

My prediction is: If there is an *Inception* sequel, it won't star DiCaprio or feature his character, and it won't be directed by Nolan. Nolan will produce, and possibly have a story credit, but other people will write the screenplay and direct. The real question is whether anyone will see an *Inception* sequel without DiCaprio and Nolan. My short answer: I wouldn't be on my list.

And now back to vacation. See you next week.

—August 4, 2010 *Next 343, Previous 339*

Ten Great Directors Who Flopped in SciFi

Back in April I made the point that some of the best science fiction films out there were directed by filmmakers not generally associated with the genre—showing that science-fiction film is not a hermetically sealed world. But there's a flip side to this: directors who have been successful outside of science fiction but who find themselves falling flat in the world of spacemen and speculation—thus showing that, if it's not a closed off genre, a filmmaker still has to do his homework.

To make this point, here's a list of notable, celebrated, and even legendary directors who didn't quite get a grip on science fiction, in the order they've come into my head.

Tim Burton: If there's any working director whose creative chops would lend themselves to science fiction, it should be Burton, who has an decidedly otherworldly way of viewing reality. But his *Mars Attacks!* spoof of alien-invasion films was tedious when it should have been funny, and his *Planet of the Apes* remake was simply tedious, period. Burton gets credit for *Edward Scissorhands*, which does feature Johnny Depp imitating Robert Smith imitating Frankenstein, but ultimately his best science fiction–related film is *Ed Wood*, about the man who made the worst science-fiction film ever. There's irony for you.

Chris Columbus: Columbus proved that he could find his way around fantasy with the first two Harry Potter films, and of course *Home Alone* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* made him an A-list comedy director. But when he made Robin Williams the world's most mawkish android in *Bicentennial Man*, he showed that science fiction really wasn't his thing.

Mike Nichols: An Oscar winner for *The Graduate* and the director of classics ranging from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to *The Birdcage*. But in his roll call of classics, neither *The Day of the Dolphin* nor *What Planet Are You From?* is likely to be brought up with any seriousness, although to be fair, they're both better than *Regarding Henry*.

Ivan Reitman: Another director you'd think would be a natural with science fiction, considering that he's got *Ghost Busters* under his belt. But neither *Junior*, with its pregnant Arnold Schwarzenegger, nor *Evolution*, with its slacking David Duchovny, got much in the way of traction with audiences or critics. But, hey, *Ghostbusters III* is supposed to be coming sometime.

Barry Levinson: *Rain Man* brought him an Academy Award, and he's shown his versatility as a director with films that range from *Young Sherlock Holmes* to *Good Morning, Vietnam* to *Wag the Dog*. But *Sphere* ranks as the most tedious

Michael Crichton adaptation to date, which given the fact that *Congo* is lurking out there somewhere, is saying something.

Brian De Palma: An undisputed master of horror and suspense and his *Untouchables* ranks as one of the most stylish and engaging gangster films out there. But *Mission to Mars*? The only good thing you can say about it was that at least it was not as aggressively stupid as *Red Planet*, the other Mars movie that year.

Steven Soderbergh: An Oscar winner (for *Traffic*) and nominee (for *Erin Brockovich*) and a director known to alternate classy mainstream entertainments like the *Ocean's* series with difficult indie films like *The Good German* and a two-part epic on the life of Che Guevara. His *Solaris*, a remake of a seminal, challenging Russian film, falls into the the latter camp, despite starring George Clooney and having James Cameron as a producer. It's not a bad film at all, but it doesn't really suggest that Soderbergh was doing much more than checking science fiction off his Genres of Films to Make list.

Cameron Crowe: Beloved chronicler of a generation with *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (which he wrote), *Say Anything* . . . and *Singles* (who nabbed an Oscar for writing *Almost Famous* (which he also directed). But while his Tom Cruise-starring *Vanilla Sky* grossed $100 million, it was an empty exercise in style and in nearly every respect an inferior version of *Abre los ojos*, the Alejandro Amenábar film of which it was a remake. On the other hand, it did bring Penélope Cruz to our shores. Let's call it a wash.

Kenneth Branagh: The brilliant modern adapter of Shakespeare looked to be a perfect fit to update *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, especially with Robert De Niro as the monster. Instead, it was a melodramatic mess. A shame. Let's hope he does better with *Thor*.

John Boorman: Yes, yes, *Excalibur*, *Deliverance*, *Hope and Glory*, *The Emerald Forest*. I have one word for you: *Zardoz*. For God's sake, *Zardoz*. We're done here.

—August 11, 2010 *Next 197, Previous 341*

Science-fiction Films That Changed the World

Ov, been back from Austral a for nearly a week and I m still jet lagged and groggy So natura s its a perfect time to handle a deep and existentia question that has come into my mailbox:

> Can a scien e fiction movie change the world? Has a sc ence fiction movie changed the world?

Whoa, dude I m suddenly back in my college dorm room w th the black light on, listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* That s like heavy, man

But its a so an nteresting question although as w th so many things we have to de ine our terms Chang ng the wor d s a highly fungible phrase since if you want to get reals peda tic any action changes the world, although generally n a highly trivia or spec fic manner, he effects of wh ch may not be ob vious For example the film *The Adventures of Prate Nash* is not generally considered to be a w rld chang ng science fiction film But t did cost about $100 m llion of movie studio Warner Brothers money and that almost cer tainly did have consequences For example director R n Underwood who had previously helmed the hits *Tremors* and *City Slickers* has n t made a ma or movie since *Prate* nor has screenwriter Neil C thbert Would he world be different if *Prate* hadn t cratered and Underwood and C thbert had other movies out there? Well, at the very least their wor ds would be different In any event every act on has a reaction a matter how sma l But let s talk about f lms that really changed the world

The comm n use of 'changed the world' mplies that the wor d as most people know has been altered in substant al and fr quently way the N z nva sion of Poland n 1939 as an ob vious example qual fies as a world changing event as do the atomic bomb drop ed on Hiro sh ma and Nagasaki The m oon landings were world changers Changers of two worlds l teral y On a rather lesser scale you could argue that the Beatles appear ng on *The Ed Sullivan Show* changed the world as did the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* the wor d s first f ll length animated film and wh ch d sted for ty mill on sta l one of the top ten film releases of all time).

I don t think that there s any film much less a science fiction film that has ever had the same world chang ng q alities as the moon landing As much as I love film and the stories t tells it doesn t reach the eve l of actu ly chang ng the planet and stepping foot on an other w rld But certain y it s poss b e for a science fiction film to have the same l ve l of cultura impact as the Beatles or *Snow White*.

And in fact I can think of two r ght off the top of my head The first was the very first science fiction f lm *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, created in 1902 by Georges M li s This fourteen minute f lm liter lly set the template for science fiction spectacles heavy on effects and adventure l ght on story and sense that s for better or worse st l employed today But bey nd that it woke up both filmmakers and audiences to the mag cal poss b l ties of film

as a medium and the fact that one could do in film through effects and effort what had previously been achievable only in imagination. Over a hundred years on, *Le Voyage* is delightfully quaint, but at the time audiences were saying, "I've never seen that before. That's a world changer."

The second is *Star Wars*, although not for anything that's on the screen. Despite its awesome technical freshness and innovation and the fact that *Star Wars* was a fun film at a time when science-fiction films had generally gone off the dystopian deep end, everything that *Star Wars* is is begged, borrowed or stolen from other films, starting with those of Melies, moving on to the *Flash Gordon* serials and ending up with Akira Kurosawa's. In that regard, *Star Wars* is a synthetic rather than an original masterpiece.

No, the way *Star Wars* changed the world was in how the film and its series (through extraordinarily savvy marketing, particularly to children and nerds) found its way into nearly every possible nook and cranny of our culture to an extent that it's very nearly impossible to avoid. There have been other massively popular films and other films with an extensive reach into common culture, but none with the same relentless pervasiveness as the *Star Wars* films. Likewise, the *Star Wars* films and their creator George Lucas have had a huge impact on nearly every aspect of filmmaking, from how sound and visual effects are produced to how film studios package and promote films to how theaters themselves exhibit those films.

Blame my pal if Lucas had been hit by a car the day after he finished *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars* had never been made, the cultural and cinematic world we live in would be vastly different, so much so that it's a little hard to imagine what it would be like. Would it be better or worse? That's a matter of personal taste. But it's a simple fact that *Star Wars* changed the world.

Hitting the Mailbag—*Monsters*, *Tron*, and More Influential SciFi

Hi. Thanks to lingering sickness and general fatigue (for which I blame Australia—curse your antipodean flu bugs—my brain is the consistency of goo). So what better time to go to the mailbag and answer some questions?

First question:

> Any thoughts on *Monsters*?

For those of you who don't know, *Monsters* is the upcoming science fiction film about the aftermath of an alien invasion that was made with off the shelf video cameras and an alleged budget of $15,000. I'm skeptical that's the film's actual cost. I would imagine the postproduction required to get the film to a legitimate theatrical release level would expand that budget considerably—but no matter how you slice it's a very cheaply made film.

My thoughts: I'm looking forward to it, and I hope it works. If it does, and does well, it will be a reminder that the best special effect a science-fiction film can have is a good story. This will mean nothing to the folks making the next Transformers film, of course. But it might be useful for everyone else.

Next question:

> Last week you gave two examples of science fiction films that changed the world. Can you give us an example of a science fiction film that changed the world—that most people don't know of?

Well, I don't suspect most people knew about *Le Voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*), one of the films I mentioned last week, because it's over 100 years old and we're in a cinematic era that dictates that any movie from more than three years ago is ripe for a reboot, so a sense of history is not precisely cherished at this moment in film history. But I sense that my reader is asking specifically about a film that is influential but not popular—something beloved by filmmakers and filmmaker wannabes, if not by the masses.

In science fiction, I think the film that best fits this mold—although I think not as well as my questioning friend might want—is 1972's *Solaris*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky and adapted from the novel by Stanislaw Lem. Slow moving, icy, and more than a little weird, *Solaris* wouldn't have been a movie that American moviegoers would have warmed to even if it weren't created in the Soviet Union in the middle of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, both scholars of film and of science fiction consider it a highly significant and influential film in the genre, and its made its mark on a generation of filmmakers, including, of course, Steven Soderbergh, who directed a

remake of the film and also, I suspect James Cameron who in *Avatar* posited a world-spanning intelligence that was presaged by a similar sort of intelligence in Tarkovsky's film (Cameron produced Soderbergh's remake incidentally).

I say the film doesn't quite fit the mold because although it has influenced significant filmmakers what those filmmakers have done with it hasn't amounted to much. Soderbergh's remake was not notably successful, financially or creatively, and whatever elements Cameron might have nicked (or to put it more charitably, internalized) are overwhelmed by his other cinematic and technical choices. This is one of the downsides of being a largely obscure film.

Next question:

> Am I the only person confused about how excited people are about *Iron Legacy*? Don't people remember that the first Iron film was awful?

I want to save most of my thoughts about *Iron Legacy* for when we're a little closer to the film's release date, but I will say that I sympathize with this concern. The original *Iron* is unarguably an important film in science fiction but that importance is purely on technical grounds — the extensive and integral use of computer graphics and animation — because the story is juvenile and the acting is bad. (Among other things, this was during Jeff Bridges' "I let my squint do my acting for me" phase.)

But then again, the audience for the original *Iron* back in the day was largely 11 to 15 year old boys, the sort that spent their days hovering over a Xenious game in the arcade and would later look on those days fondly. I don't think anyone who is not delusional thinks *Iron* is a good movie, but they're willing not to think about it too hard in order to enjoy the warm glow the memory gives them. So when that good ol' feeling gets trotted out again with superspectacular new graphics (in 3-D — don't forget the 3-D), well, why wouldn't they get excited all over again?

If *Iron Legacy* actually turns out to be a better movie than *Iron* (that won't be difficult) then that will be a bonus. But if not then everyone gets to imagine having a light cycle again (in 3-D) and that will probably be enough.

Five Years That Changed Science Fiction Forever

I've been on a little bit of a kick regarding significant science fiction films the last couple of weeks and this week I'd like to come at it from a slightly different angle. As significant as a science fiction film can be, it's rarely so in isolation; there are years that stick out as being important for the genre because two or more films cause a shift in how science-fiction film is seen by the public or by the industry. Below you'll find my list of the five years that changed science-fiction film, arranged by order of their importance.

1977

Easily the most important year in science-fiction film history—and one of the most important in film history period—because of, surprise, *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*. I went on in depth about this a couple of weeks ago, but to recap quickly: aside from its massive popularity, it incorporated a large number of technical advances for which it was amply rewarded; the film won six Oscars, most in technical categories, and started a focus on back-end processes that continues to this day. It also cemented in Hollywood's mind the idea of the summer blockbuster. Effects-laden, merchandise-driven spectaculars have been a part of the film industry since the early days, but for better or worse this film **pushed the category into overdrive.**

Often overlooked in the wake of *Star Wars* however, is another massively successful 1977 science fiction film: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, released late in the year. It confirmed that *Star Wars*'s cocktail of special effects and science fiction themes was not a fluke, and soon after every studio was looking for its own sci-fi spectacular to shove up on the screen.

1968

Another year with a one-two sci-fi commercial-critical combination: *Planet of the Apes* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *Planet of the Apes* was significant not only for its technical and makeup advances (the latter of which prompted a special Academy Award), but because of, further special effects-ready Charlton Heston, who was a legitimate A-list star at an era when A-list stars didn't do science fiction. After *Apes*'s success, Heston would go on to star in other A-list science fiction films: *Soylent Green*, *The Omega Man*, showing other major stars **that science fiction wasn't slumming.**

Stanley Kubrick's *2001* tapped into both the space race and the "Tune in, turn on, and drop out" vibe of young America by offering a film that was simultaneously a reasonable extrapolation of their current technology and space exploration and a psychedelic head trip experience—both thanks to cutting-edge special effects that won Kubrick his only Oscar. Both *Apes* and *2001* kicked off a run of serious science-fiction films with sometimes dark social themes, a

trend that would continue for almost a decade until *Star Wars* arrived on the scene.

1931

Science fiction got its first top grosser for the year. *Frankenstein* (also classified as a horror film), which took in what would be the equivalent of about $375 million today. Along with *Dracula*, also a monster hit that year for the same studio, Universal, it established the idea that fantastical genre films could be audience pleasers. Universal certainly didn't need to be told twice, and in the next decade it cranked out its classic monster movies, which combined horror, fantasy and science fiction in equal measure. Those films would have an unexpected fringe benefit for Universal: the sets would be recycled for *Flash Gordon*, the studio's cheaply made but highly successful science-fiction serial.

1982

Star Wars and *Close Encounters* established that science-fiction filmmaking could be epic. In 1982, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* showed that it could have a heart, and that the genre could very successfully (and profitably) marry itself to a family-friendly story and audience. This would in turn spawn the eighties subgenre of Spielbergesque films featuring a winsome alien (robot, Sasquatch) and leading to various heartwarming adventures. This subgenre, while profitable at the time, eventually trickled out but has recently found a second life in the form of computer-animated films such as *Wall-E*, a near-computerized descendant of *E.T.* *E.T.*'s influence on science fiction film was immediate and obvious, but the other major science fiction film's influence was not. *Blade Runner* was not a financial success on its release, but its visual look dazzled an entire generation of aspiring science fiction professionals, from writers to directors to visual artists, and its influence is felt not only in science fiction film but in literature, video games, and graphic arts.

1902

The year that started it all, with Georges Melies's *Le Voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*). I think I've been boring quite a bit recently, in fact, so I'll avoid rehashing what makes it significant. What I will say is that the film was popular enough to be pirated — by no less than Thomas Edison, who took pilfered copies and exhibited them in the U.S. without paying Melies — proving that the concerns of the film industry today are as old as the industry itself and that the appetite for science fiction is just as old too.

Man's Best Friend in Science-Fiction Movies

This last weekend was a momentous one in the Scalzi household as we debuted a new member of the family Daisy a two-year old Labrador mastiff mix "Lab stiff") that we picked up from a local dog rescue organization She is a complete sweetheart and we all adore her, except for the cats who are deeply annoyed by her presence as of course the cats would be But we suspect they will get used to her in time.

Bringing a new dog into the house naturally got me thinking about dogs in science fiction films They're not usually the stars but they show up surprisingly often to add companionship and sometimes comic relief Which is not to say that man's best friend always has an easy time of it in the films it's a rough world out there, especially in science fiction Here's a brief sampler of the dogs and the films. Warning: there may be spoilers.

***A Boy and His Dog*[1] (1975)**

One of the few films where a dog is actually a star of the film this one features Blood, a hyperintelligent telepathic pup played by one of the dogs that played Tiger on *The Brady Bunch* that wanders around a postapocalypse U S with his friend Vic played by a young Don Johnson Blood isn't what you'd call a nice doggy but then the postapocalypse U S isn't a nice place At the end Vic appears to have to make a choice between Blood and his new girlfriend Let's just say the movie doesn't imply that things end well at all for the girlfriend

***E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*[2] (1982)**

Harvey the dog is initially less than friendly to the film's extraterrestrial but warms to him after the two share potato salad and beer At the end he also appears ready to ditch the humans for the spaceship, but E T apparently orders him back If you ever have a chance to read the very charming novelization of the film it goes into more fun and interesting detail about the relationship between E.T. and Harvey

***The Thing*[3] (1982)**

Aw why are those mean people in that helicopter shooting at that nice husky dog? Because that husky turns out not to be so nice and also strictly speaking not really a husky either What happens after this pseudo pup gets put in a pen with other real dogs is the reason this film is not high on the list of top films for dog lovers.

***Alien 3*[4] (1992)**

There's just one dog on the prison planet Ripley crashed down on Guess which creature meets the face hugger? Yeah, it's not fair That said director David Fincher for his now somewhat disowned feature film debut makes the most

birth scene featuring the poor dog both the goriest and most stylish of the entire film series. Not that it does the dog any good, mind you.

***Independence Day* (1996)**[5]
Otherwise known as the film that killed off millions of humans but goes out of its way not to kill the dog. The dog in question, Boomer, is seen outrunning a massive fireball of destruction incinerating everything else and slipping through a door crack just as wavy heat lines catch up to him. In real life, of course, he'd have been puppy toast. But if director Roland Emmerich had filmed that, audiences would have found where he lived and killed him in the night. Best for everyone that Boomer lived.

***I Am Legend* (2007)**[6]
This will be a huge spoiler for those of you who haven't seen this film yet. Awww, saddest doggy death in science fiction film ever. And Will Smith, to his credit, really sells it. He's been nominated for Best Actor, you know. Twice, even.

***Up* (2009)**[7]
It's more fantasy than science fiction, but the way the dogs are made to speak is through technology, so I'll take it. And of course Dug, goofy and lovable and delightfully dim, is one of the best movie dogs ever. The line "I have just met you, and I love you" both perfectly sums up what people love about dogs and the attitude our new pup Daisy had with us. Which is why every time I imagine her speaking I think of her using Dug's voice. I don't know if she would appreciate that, being a girl dog. But I find it amusing, to say the least.

Yes, I know, I'm completely ignoring the *Cats & Dogs* films. But if it's all the same to you, I'm going to pretend to live in a world where those films never happened. It's a much happier world over here. You should join me.

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Seven Studios That Reaped Infinite Rewards From SciFi

Here's kind of a fun film-nerd question to round out 2010: we all know that science fiction is both popular and productive for film studios, but which film studios have benefited the most from science fiction over the years? Are there some for whom it has done better than others?

There are a number of ways of answering this question, some rather more complicated than others. For this little exercise, I'm going to use one of the simplest: I'm going to look at the ten films of each major studio that have the highest domestic market grosses (as supplied by BoxOfficeMojo.com) and use that. There are legitimate issues with this technique—for example, I'll be using grosses unadjusted for inflation, which favors more recent films, and I'm ignoring the rest of the world outside the U.S. and Canada—but, as a conversation starter, it's workable enough.

And which movie studios qualify as major? For the purposes of this exercise, they are Fox, Warner Brothers, Universal, Disney, Sony, Paramount, and MGM, although admittedly, at this stage the latter has a "major" appellation largely for historical and sentimental reasons. By and large subsidiaries of these major studios are included in their box office numbers, although there are a few exceptions—both Disney and Warner Brothers incorporate box-office numbers from Pixar and New Line Cinema, respectively, only after those respective studios were fully consumed by their larger partners.

So which studios have the highest percentage of science fiction in their top ten films?

1. 20th Century Fox: Eight of Fox's top ten highest grossing films are science fiction, a fact that is utterly unsurprising for the studio that either produced or distributed all of the live-action *Star Wars* films to date. (The animated *Clone Wars* film was put out through Warner Brothers.) Five of the six *Star Wars* films are on the top ten (only *The Empire Strikes Back* is missing), and the rest of the eight slots are filled by *Avatar* (at number one), *Independence Day*, and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (the latter of which also qualifies as a comic book movie). The two remaining films: *Home Alone* and *Night at the Museum*.

2. Sony: Sony, which incorporates Columbia and TriStar, has seven, three of which are Spider-Man movies, which are science fictional largely as a courtesy. (Peter Parker has a quasi-scientific reason for having superpowers, as do most of the villains. But I'm counting them, so there.) Three of the others are Will Smith films: the two *Men in Black* films and *Hancock* (which teeters on the science fictional borderline). The final entry, *Terminator 2*, which back in the day was distributed by TriStar.

3. Paramount: This studio has six science-fiction films in its top roster: the two Transformers films, the two Iron Man films, the most recent *Star Trek* film (which was the most financially successful of all of the *Trek* films) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, which to be fair is mostly science fictional as an afterthought, but, hey, aliens. It is what it is, man.

4. Universal: The home of *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, which after almost 30 years is still the studio's highest grossing film. And for that matter two of the three other science fiction films in this studio's top ten are directed by Steven Spielberg as well: *Jurassic Park* and its sequel *The Lost World*. Also in the top ten lineup: this year's animated film *Despicable Me*. Which, yes, surprises me a bit.

5. Warner Brothers: Only two of this studio's top ten are science fiction films: *Inception*, from this year, and *The Matrix Reloaded*, from 2003. Some folks would argue to include *The Dark Knight*, the studio's highest grosser, but it falls into the "not quite science fiction" category for me. As an aside, six of Warner Brothers' top ten movies are from the Harry Potter series. It's for Warner what the *Star Wars* series is for Fox.

6. Disney: Has no science fiction in its top ten; its highest grossing science fictional film would be *The Incredibles*, which at $261 million domestic is $30 million below Disney's tenth film, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The rest of the top ten are the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, three Pixar flicks, *The Sixth Sense*, and *The Lion King*.

7. MGM: No science-fiction films here, either, and it's telling, regarding the current state of the studio, that its highest grosser is now 70 years old: *Gone with the Wind*, and only two of its top ten were released in the last decade. This was once the largest movie studio in Hollywood, how the mighty have fallen.

All told, out of 70 available top-ten slots for the major studios, science fiction fills 27 — nearly one out of every four. That's a pretty impressive number for any single genre.

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Star Wars Characters—Who Got Better? Who Got Worse?

Occasionally I am asked, in my capacity as an "Official Science Fiction Film Critic", to render a judgment to settle a dispute between friends who are nerds. This week's one of those times, as I received the following e-mail:

> Settle a disagreement I'm having with a friend. He's a Star Wars fanboy who will argue with a straight face that the prequel trilogy has redeeming qualities. I'm of the opinion that they should have stopped after Empire because after that point every single character in the series starts to suck. He says I'm wrong. You hate the prequels, so I'd guess you're on my side. Help me, John Scalzi, you're my only hope!

So the question, as I see it, is this: do all the *Star Wars* characters start to suck after the first two films—or more generally, do the characters become less cool the further along we go in the series (going by the chronological release of the films, not by the narrative arc of the entire series)?

Well, I have bad news for my correspondent. In fact, not every major *Star Wars* character gets worse as we go along. Some do, but several get better or, at least, more interesting—even if the films themselves started a quality decline after *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Which characters improve as we go along, and which ones don't? Let's take a look.

Characters Who Get Better:

Luke Skywalker: This one's obvious. When the first film begins, he's a whiny dork who's never been beyond Mos Eisley, and he's damned lucky Han Solo didn't toss him out an airlock. By the second film, he's gone beyond whiny to develop genuine issues, which actually does count as an improvement, and by the third film he really is a fairly Zen-like badass, even if he's written poorly.

Obi-Wan Kenobi: Alec Guinness was not very fond of this part, and with reason in *Star Wars*, all he really gets to do is mumble semi-deep platitudes to the unblinking Luke and do scutwork for the plot, namely turn off a tractor beam and then get dehilted by Darth Vader. In *Empire* and *Return of the Jedi*, what we mostly learn is that even beyond the grave, he's still not very good at telling the truth. He's a far more interesting character in the prequels and gets to do more exciting things, even if the plots require him to be slightly dim.

Chewbacca: It's not so much that he gets better than that he's consistently awesome. Not even the *The Star Wars Holiday Special* can take that away from him.

Jar Jar Binks: How does the series's worst character get better after *The Phantom Menace*? Simple: he's seen far less in *Episode II* and even less in *Episode III*. Less is more with Jar Jar. Much less is much more.

The Emperor: His cackling malevolence was fun in *Jedi*, but it's an absolute joy in *Revenge of the Sith*, mostly because the Emperor is the only character in the entire prequel trilogy who is actually allowed to have any fun. And why shouldn't he? Evil is his business, and business is good.

Characters Who Get Worse:

Darth Vader: Another obvious one, right? Here's the evilest evil dude in the history of evil—the guy who mind crushes tracheae as a management tool and slices off his own kid's hand just to get his attention. And in the prequel trilogy? First he's the universe's most annoying 8 year old; then he's an emo kid with a lightsaber. Now you look at Darth Vader and think, Aw, all he really needed was a hug. And that's just wrong.

Yoda: Seriously, how awesome was Yoda in *Empire*? So awesome that as audience members you forgot he was in fact a Muppet. Then comes the prequel trilogy, and worse: his grammar is more clueless as he, and like a small rodent he must jump to amuse audiences. By the time *Sith* rolled around, I knew I was looking at nothing more than a special effect, and that made me sad.

Princess Leia: She was spunky and sassy in *Star Wars* and reduced to being sort of Earth Mother-ish in *Jedi*, having to assure Han that in fact she wasn't going to suddenly run off with her brother. Yes, I know, the metal bikini in *Jedi*. Run off and take a cold shower now, please. A metal bikini does not make up for a lack of character development.

C-3PO: When, in *Episode I*, George Lucas asked me to accept that C-3PO was assembled by an 8 year old Darth Vader, that was the day my innocence died. Well, maybe it wasn't that bad, but come on—it was pretty bad. Plus he spent all three prequel movies being a useless nanny—well, more of a useless nanny than he already was. On the other hand, it's nice to see him and R2-D2 happily monogamous through the entire series.

Boba Fett: Just when we thought it couldn't get worse than being eaten by a Sarlacc, we get Boba Fett's moody years. *Oy vey.*

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The Space-Invader Cheat Sheet—Which Hostile Aliens Did It Best?

This weekend sees the release of *Battle Los Angeles* in which the aliens come with invasion on their minds—you know like they do. And we know they do because science-fiction film history is packed with all sorts of films where the aliens come and by force or stealth, try to take over the world. How will the aliens in *Battle* stack up to their predecessors? I've compiled this space invader cheat sheet to help you compare and contrast.

Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000: We can all agree that this is a terrible, terrible movie, but you know what? The aliens did invade and kick the humans' butts, and when the movie opens up our descendants are reduced to scrambling around radioactive hills and pounding rocks together to survive. That's a successful invasion. Sure, the humans get revenge, but that's not about the invasion; that's just bad corporate management, and that's an entirely different thing.

Invasion score: A

The Faculty: Cross the universe to take over a high school? And fail? Talk about underachieving.

Invasion score: F

Independence Day: See, now, these guys have a plan. Step one: find a planet. Step two: zap the native dominant species with giant lasers. Step three: profit. And they go through their invasion checklist with style, making sure to obliterate landmarks and to make humans make their own cities in a futile attempt to fight back, which is a nice touch. And then they fall down by letting an old fighter piloted by humans slip through their defenses and upload a killer computer virus. This would be like a modern aircraft carrier letting a P-51 Mustang land and no one thinking twice about it. Dumb. But until then, nicely done, invasion.

Invasion score: B-

Invasion of the Body Snatchers: In the 1956 version, the people in the movie manage to warn the rest of us about the aliens who replace us, but by the time the 1978 version rolls around the aliens manage to take over the whole planet with hardly a peep. Hey, it was the seventies. It was a crazy time for everyone; we can't be blamed if we didn't bother to let anyone know humanity was being traded in for pod people. They're nice, quiet neighbors, anyway.

Invasion score: A

Mars Attacks! It's hard to give full credit to an alien invasion ultimately thwarted by Slim Whitman (although, well done, Slim Whitman), but I will say this

right up until the moment Whitman gets the best of them, these alien invaders have an amazing amount of fun zapping Congress, destroying landmarks, and performing unspeakable medical experiments on humans. It's inspiring in its way to see the aliens take such joy in their work, even if their work is wiping us out. So I'll give them extra credit for effort.

Invasion score: C+

The Puppet Masters: Take the comment up there about *The Faculty*, replace "high school" with "Des Moines" and proceed.

Invasion score: F

Signs: Really, aliens? You invade a planet that is made up of stuff that can melt flesh off your bones? You deserve to be defeated by Joaquin Phoenix and a baseball bat. Stupidest invasion ever.

Invasion score: F

They Live: The aliens come to enjoy a fabulous conspicuous-consumption lifestyle and also to slowly turn the Earth into a version of their own world through the magic of global warming. Stupid of them to leave alien-revealing sunglasses around, of course, but the fact is that by the time "Rowdy" Roddy Piper gets his hands on a pair, the invasion is already a done deal. You go, yuppie aliens.

Invasion score: B+

Transformers: These technically are invasion films, since the robots are from space and the Decepticons, at least, are happy to kick the crap out of the humans (as loudly as possible) to get what they want, which usually happens to be here on earth. But that's just the thing: while the Decepticons are happy to kill humans and use their machines to build an army — because why not, right? the Earth is ultimately beside the point for them and their plans for universal domination. And they get beaten by the Autobots anyway. Swell even.

Invasion score: D

War of the Worlds: Why do they invade? Essentially, because they don't like us. Which is fine, I suppose, but one thinks that if that were truly the case it would just be easier to nuke us from orbit. (It's the only way to be sure.) A species that is smart enough to fly from Mars or wherever to waste us noisy humans probably should know about microbes. Tell me I'm wrong about this one. I don't think I am.

Invasion score: C

—March 9, 2011 *Next 203, Previous 165*

Where Are the Female Directors and Writers in Science-Fiction Film?

So here's a question for you off the top of your head—that means without hitting Google or Box Office Mojo—can you name the top science-fiction film at the box office directed by a woman? Can you name the top science fiction film at the box office with a woman screenwriter?

Take your time; I'll wait.

I'm figuring most of you came up with some blanks on those questions, so let me tell you how I did with the same two questions.

First I found it easier to come up with an answer to the screenwriter question because it's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, which was written by Melissa Mathison and even after almost 30 years stands at No. 6 on the all-time domestic box office list, with $435 million. Not too far behind that is *The Empire Strikes Back*, for which Leigh Brackett has a co-writing credit; that's at $290 million.

It's the director question that's the real stumper, and I have to admit I had to hit the reference material for it. The answer I came up with—I'm happy to be corrected if someone finds a woman director with better box office—is *Deep Impact*, the 1998 asteroid flick by Mimi Leder that, with $140 million in domestic box office, is No. 236 on the all-time list.

Here's the other thing: there are 29 science fiction films on the top 100 all-time domestic-box list, from *Avatar* at the top to *Back to the Future* at No. 98. Of those 29 films, none of them has a woman director and, aside from the ones already mentioned, none has a woman screenwriter either. You have to go to No. 111 to find the next, *Monsters vs. Aliens*, co-written by Maya Forbes.

I'm going to throw in *Terminator 2*, the No. 30 science fiction box office hit, for this next statement: out of the top 30 science fiction films in U.S. box office history, none has a woman director and only two have women screenwriters—and the most recent of them is from 29 years ago. Likewise, *Deep Impact* was a dozen years ago.

So you may ask, What gives?

Part of what gives is that it's difficult to find women directors anywhere near the top of box office lists. Of the top 100 films in domestic box office, exactly one features a woman director: *Shrek* (No. 50), co-directed by Vicky Jenson. Next highest: *Twilight* at No. 118 (Catherine Hardwicke). On the screenwriting front it gets better, particularly in the genre of fantasy films, since *Alice in Wonderland*, all three *Lord of the Rings* films, and all the *Twilight* films feature women writers. But even so, women screenwriters are in the distinct minority overall.

And part of *that* has to do with the fact that although there are successful women directors and screenwriters working in movies, they have so far been clustered in particular genres that can do well year to year but not on the all-time list. Nancy Meyers, Nora Ephron, and Penny Marshall have films that made over $100 million in box office, but they work primarily in comedy.

which, while a reliable genre, doesn't always hit the stratospheric heights of the genres of action, science fiction, fantasy, and animation, which dominate the all-time list (Highest-ranking non-animated comedy: *The Hangover*, No. 49).

Women have also done well in drama and independent films. Two of the latter category, with women directors and screenwriters—*The Kids Are All Right* and *Winter's Bone*—were nominated for Best Picture last year (Although their directors weren't; it was an all-male slate). But again, these films, while they can be financially successful, particularly relative to their production costs, don't always compete in the same the box office league.

But these aren't reasons why women couldn't regularly write or direct science-fiction films; only why they haven't. Male directors of quirky dramas and indie films have made the leap into big budget science-fiction and adventure films (Christopher Nolan and Bryan Singer are the obvious examples, but Marc Forester, who directed *Monster's Ball* and *The Kite Runner*, was handed the keys to the Bond franchise with *Quantum of Solace*—so why not women directors as well? I think there are probably a number of answers to that, most of which boil down to the perception that some things are for men and boys, and the film industry, in the end, is more conservative with its bets than not.

But none of that takes away from the fact that, as a genre, science fiction appears to have a bigger problem with women directors and screenwriters than other genres. Looking at top-grossing films is a somewhat distorted way of looking at the bigger picture, but on the other hand, look: I can see women directors and writers working at the top levels of other film genres, including the closely related fantasy film genre, at the present time. I have to go back to the twentieth century to see them at the same level in science fiction. That's not right.

—March 23, 2011 *Next 29, Previous 203*

Will Film Go By Faster? A Look Into the 48-Frame-per-Second Future

A couple of weeks ago, Disney sent me *Tron: Legacy* in a five-disc package comprised of Blu-ray, DVD, and digital copies of the film, a Blu-Ray of the original *Tron*, and—what is clearly the piece de résistance of this particular package—a 3-D Blu-ray of the film (which you may watch if, as the packaging notes, you have a 3-D capable Blu-ray player and a 3-D capable high-definition television set (and not noted on the packaging but relevant all the same—you haven't yet lost or sat on the 3-D glasses that come with the 3-D TV).

The irony of this package is that when 3-D was first used in the fifties, and when its later iterations were trotted out, in the eighties and today, one of the arguments for it was that it gave people something they couldn't get on their TVs at home, it raised the spectacle level of going to the cinema to a whole new dimension (pun intended). Film buffs can argue whether 3-D ultimately lives up to its billing, but by and large there's no doubting the rationale—or wasn't, until now. Not all that many people have the total 3-D setup at home yet, but the capability for anyone to have it is there. The limiting factor at the moment is the expense, and that's likely to go down as time goes on, just as the cost of HDTVs went from ridiculous to (mostly) affordable over time.

So the question then becomes this: what's going to be cinema's next technological trick to bring moviegoers in? The answer to this may have been given last week when James Cameron (you may have heard of him) announced at CinemaCon in Las Vegas that he "fully intends" to make the next two *Avatar* films at higher frame rates[2].

For those of you showing me your "What?" face at the moment, a little background: nearly all motion picture films are recorded at 24 frames per second (i.e., 24 still pictures that when shown in sequence over the space of one second fool your brain into perceiving motion). Why 24 frames per second? Because it's close to the minimum needed to give the illusion of fluid movement and because that's what filmmakers have been using for decades. Why mess with a good thing? Twenty-four frames a second is what makes film look like film, rather than videotape recordings (which typically have 30 frames a second, giving them a slightly more fluid look.

What Cameron is proposing to do is record films using twice as many (or 2.5 times as many) frames per second, which will have the effect of making your brain register the movement as even more lifelike than before. Basically, the more you pump up the frame rate, the more like real life it will seem. "When you author and project a movie at 48 or 60, it becomes a different movie," Cameron told the CinemaCon crowd. "The higher frame rate takes the glass out of the window. In fact, it is just reality. It is really stunning."

It's an interesting argument and one that some have been making for a while. Film critic Roger Ebert, for example, has long been a champion of a 48 frames-per-second film system called Maxivision 48. But I can see a couple of arguments against it.

The first is stylistic: simply put, the 24-frames per second look for film is culturally ingrained as a cinematic touchstone, while the higher frame rate of video, typically used on TV, is perceived as looking inferior to it. This sort of visual cultural marker is so ingrained that, ironically, a higher frame rate might feel cheaper and less cinematic. Or, as Cameron himself noted when he showed a fight scene recorded at 48 frames per second: "This almost feels like two stunt guys mock fighting."

The second argument is more practical: it's already expensive enough to author special effects at 24 frames per second. How much more expensive will it be with twice as many (or more) frames? I expect that, at least initially, it will cost a lot more — which is why, at least initially, it will have to be someone like Cameron who takes this sort of technological leap. He's one of the very few filmmakers working whose box office record, incorporating innovative technology, is so successful that studios would be dumb not to let him experiment some more.

So I look forward to seeing whether Cameron and other filmmakers can pull off moving film into a post-24 frames per second era and thus offer us another chance to be wowed by the visual experience of cinema. The final irony here, mind you, is that we're already ready for the home video versions: most newer televisions can refresh their onscreen images at least 60 times a second, with some clocking in with 120 or 240 refreshes a second. I guess that means it's time for filmmakers to cook up something new on the tech front.

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Science-Fiction Films Through the (Rather Critical) Eyes of a Child

Not too terribly long ago, my daughter and I were flipping through television channels when I came across the 1980 version of *Flash Gordon*, which caused me to snicker and pause for a moment while I watched it.

To which my daughter (age 12) groaned. "Please tell me you're not really going to watch this," she said.

"Why shouldn't I watch it?" I asked.

"Because it's *bad*," she said.

"I know it's bad," I said. "That's part of its charm."

"No, it's not," she said, waving at the screen. "Look at it. Everything looks so fake. How can you *stand* it?"

At that point, I was going to go into a long discursive monologue about how the effects of *Flash Gordon* were intentionally retro at the time (cheesy eighties special effects technology being used to re-create cheesy thirties special effects technology was just another heaping of meta), but my daughter had a look on her face that persuaded me to stop. She was 12. No argument I could make would convince her because, as a 12 year old, she had never lived in a world where photo-realistic CGI was not a common special effect. Photo-realistic CGI is what, for her, a decent science fiction or fantasy movie should have; not having it there was a deal breaker.

Which doesn't seem fair, perhaps, to every science fiction or fantasy movie made before *Jurassic Park*, but we're talking about a 12 year old girl here. Fair doesn't enter into the picture. Maybe when she's 25 she'll have gained enough cinematic perspective to enjoy films despite clunky green screens, matte paintings, stop motion monsters, and optically printed spaceships. Right here and now, however, all of that throws her out of the movie. Fair enough.

And my daughter's question, "How can you stand it?" is also a fair question. I can stand it because I'm old enough not to hold a film's level of technology against it, but if I'm entirely honest it's also because I grew up with it. My own personal baseline for special effects technology is represented by the first *Star Wars* movie, which I saw when I was 8 years old. So, for me, the films after *Star Wars* have effects that don't faze me; they seem like real effects—while the films before it just seem fake. And the line really is that abrupt. I can't watch *Logan's Run*, which came out a year before *Star Wars*, without being painfully aware how its effects are "last generation," even if they were cutting edge for their time. And they were; the Academy gave the effects folks a special award for their work. Doesn't matter. They still throw me out of the film.

I can't blame my daughter for having the same dividing-line reaction to special effects that I had when I was near her age, but it does make me a little sad to know that there is a whole class of films she won't enjoy until she's old enough to get past the antiquated effects and that within that class of films are a whole

bunch I personally treasure. There's a lot I want to share with her in science fiction and fantasy, but I don't want to do it before she can appreciate them. Too soon, and they'll just bore her. So, for example, I suspect it'll be at least a couple of years before I spring *Buckaroo Banzai* on her.

But, in the meantime, it's been fun looking for the borderline cases that will entertain my kid with effects that don't get in the way. When I was a kid, *Star Wars* was my effects dividing line, but I still managed to be impressed by *2001* and *Planet of the Apes*. I'm looking for the same sort of films for her. You would think *Star Wars* itself would be a natural, but Lucas has hdtized with that film's effects on a regular basis, so it's not a fair test.

So I've tried other ones. So far, the most successful have been two Steven Spielberg films. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which he directed (she thought the lightning at the end was cheesy, but the melting faces are still awesome even now), and *Poltergeist*, which he produced (the effects are cheesy, but she doesn't care). *E.T.* interestingly, didn't do much for her the first time she saw it. I may try that one again later. My wife just showed her *Back to the Future*; she thought that was just okay.

And that's fine. I'm looking forward to the day, at some point in the future, where she has the same experience with her own kid: she flips past some cheesy film from this era — let's say, oh, *2012* — and lingers on it for a second while her own kids roll their eyes. I figure that's about the time my daughter will finally be able to appreciate how I felt about *Flash Gordon*. It will be a sweet day.

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Supplementary Notes

End Notes

Editor's Note: The page numbers shown are for the first page of each two- or three page article. The Web pages were retrieved twice during the production of the book to guard against server problems, but alas some links have become stale since they were linked in the original on-line publication.]

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Peter B. Olson
December 2011

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About John Scalzi

John Scalzi grew up in California, studied at the University of Chicago, then moved back to California to become a film critic. He has been writing books since 1998 — including seven non-fiction books (this is the eighth) and eight novels, two of which have appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. He blogs daily at Whatever (whatever.scalzi.com).

In 2008 he began writing a weekly column on science fiction film, which is currently on the FilmCritic.com site. In 2009, he became Creative Consultant for the television show *Stargate: Universe*. In May 2010 he was elected President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. He will serve as the Toastmaster for Chicon 7, the 2012 World Science Fiction Convention, in Chicago. In February 2011, Paramount Pictures announced it was planning to make a film of *Old Man's War*, his first published novel.

His awards include the Hugo, the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, the Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Award (science fiction category), The Seiun, The Kurd Lasswitz, and the Geffen awards.

About Dan dos Santos

Dan's work spans a variety of genres, including novels, comics, and film. He has worked for clients such as Disney, Universal Studios, Boeing Aircraft, Saatchi & Saatchi, Scholastic Books, The Greenwich Workshop, Penguin Books, Random House, Tor books, UpperDeck, Wizards of the Coast, and DC Comics.

Dan has been the recipient of many awards. Recently, he has received a 2010 Silver Medal from Spectrum, the 2007 Jack Gaughan Award for Best Emerging Artist, and was the Chesley Award winner for Best Paperback Cover of 2007. His illustrations have graced the #1 spot on the *New York Times* Best Seller list numerous times. Aside from freelance illustration, Dan also co-hosts a series of instructional demonstrations called "Art Out Loud."

"For those of you lucky enough to get this collection of John Scalzi's essays, enjoy your encounters with someone writing with knowledge and wit about science fiction movies."

– DANIEL M. KIMMEL

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